CRITICAL FAILURES III

A STORM OF S-WORDS



ROBERT BEVAN

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By Robert Bevan

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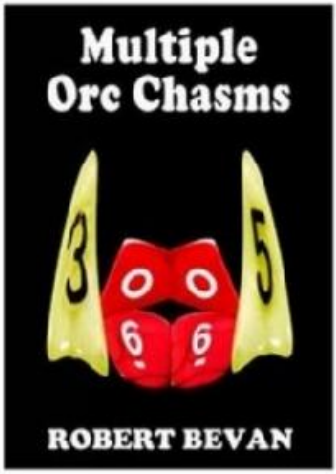
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Chapter 1

If Mordred had been having trouble moving his bowels in an unfamiliar location, the condition was cured as soon as he locked eyes with Tim. It all splattered out in a, farty, brown spray on the floor of the Chicken Hut's walk-in freezer.

"What the fuck, man?" cried Tim.

"How?" said Mordred, still squatting on the floor. "You couldn't… it's impossible." Each word came out in a puff of frost.

"Seriously?" said Tim. "On my fucking floor, dude? You couldn't hold on just a few more –" The smell of Mordred's shit hit Tim in the face like a slow-moving, but powerful, blast wave. It wasn't the horribleness of the smell that made Tim drop to his knees and throw up. He'd spent enough time with Cooper in recent weeks to develop a strong tolerance to much more offensive odors. The sucker-punch to Tim's guts, in this case, came from the ever so subtle hint of familiarity which hung in the air. Tim knew beyond a doubt that Mordred had been eating the Sweet N' Tangy chicken.

Mordred pulled up his pants and bolted toward the open freezer door. Tim made a token effort to get in his way, but Mordred was at least seven times his size and effortlessly pushed him out of the way. For a fat guy clutching shit-caked, unzipped pants around his waist, Mordred was surprisingly nimble as he sidestepped Tim's puke puddle and ran out the door.

Tim got to his feet and staggered out after him. Exiting the cloud of Sweet N' Tangy shit air, his head began to clear. He made it around the side of the big chicken oven just in time to see Mordred collecting his special dice bag, the one with the magical black dice inside.

"No!" cried Tim.

"Yeeeeee!" squealed Mordred, looking at Tim as if he was made out of spiders. He grabbed handfuls of regular dice and hurled them at Tim.

"Ow!" said Tim, shielding his face with his forearms from the barrage of dice. "You fat fucker, come back here with those dice!" But Mordred was already frantically unlocking the front door.

If that tubby bastard made it to his car, they'd all be fucked. Tim couldn't let that happen. He may have only been three feet tall, but he could stop Mordred, or at least wrestle the dice away from him. He ran through the kitchen area, out the door, and straight into Julian, who had just materialized out of the thick, salty, gulf coast air. They both tumbled to the pavement.

"Sir, are you okay?" said Ravenus, flapping his great black wings from right about the point in space where Julian's shoulder had been

a second before.

Tires squealed. Glowing red taillights glared at Tim against the dark, morning skyline like a pair of demon eyes.

"Hey," said Julian. "Isn't that Mordred's car? Who's driving it?"

"Mordred is, you dumbshit!" said Tim.

"He's alive?"

"Yes! And he's got the magic dice. We have to stop him!"

They were too late. The car raced out of the parking lot and onto Highway 90.

Julian got to his feet. "Magic Missile!" he shouted. The glowing bolt of energy flew out of Julian's palms. It smashed into Mordred's rear windshield, shattering the safety glass. The car swerved, but quickly corrected itself and continued on its course. Tim and Julian watched helplessly as it drove out of sight.

Tim pursed his lips and stared impatiently at Julian's face while it betrayed the sudden realization of a series of realities.

"I just used magic in the real world," said Julian. He looked down at Tim. "You're still a halfling." He grabbed his own huge ears. "Holy shit, I'm still an elf!"

"That's right," said Tim. "And thanks to you, we're going to have to stay that way."

"How is this *my* fault?"

"I was just about to catch Mordred when you appeared right in the way."

"How was I supposed to know any of that?" asked Julian. "Goosewaddle said to visualize the part of the store I was most familiar with. I'd only been here once, so I remembered standing outside the entrance, looking up at the sign."

"That's *Professor* Goosewaddle," said Professor Goosewaddle.

Tim turned around to find the gnomish professor and Chaz standing next to the latter's motorcycle.

"'Sup," said Chaz.

Tim pointed a stubby finger at Professor Goosewaddle. "What the hell is *he* doing here?"

"You shared your vision with him," Julian explained. "He was curious about our world, and offered to teleport the rest of us free of charge if he could tag along."

"Then where's everyone else?"

"I'm here," said Dave, walking out from inside the Chicken Hut. Sure enough, he was still short, stocky, and armored. Butterbean stood by his side, tongue and tail wagging.

"How did the wolf get here?"

"I brought him with me," said Dave. "He's heavier than he looks."

Tim scratched his head. "That still leaves Cooper."

“He was the first to go after you,” said Dave. “He should have been here about thirty seconds after you arrived.”

“Here I am,” said Cooper, lumbering out from around the side of the building.

“Where the hell have you been?” asked Tim.

“Shitter.”

“That was you? Why the hell did you materialize in the bathroom?”

Cooper shrugged. “I had to poo.” He stared down at his huge, half-orc feet. “You guys might not want to go in there for a few… well, ever.” He looked at Tim. “I’ll pay for the toilet.”

“Jesus Christ,” said Tim. “Everybody get inside before somebody sees us.” According to the clock on the wall, it wasn’t quite six in the morning, so the odds of them being spotted were still pretty slim, but it seemed wise to avoid all possible risks until they figured out their next move.

Julian was the last one inside. He turned back to look at Ravenus. “You coming?”

“I’ve come over a bit peckish, sir,” said the bird. “I thought I might have a look around, do some scavenging.”

Julian looked at Tim. Tim nodded.

Julian pointed across the highway. “Fly over there to the beach. You’re bound to come across some dead fish. Stay within a mile, and for the love of God, don’t talk to anybody.”

“Righty-ho, sir!” said Ravenus, disappearing completely once beyond the glow of the electric lights in the parking lot.

Once Julian was inside, Tim shut the door behind him, locked it, switched off the exterior sign, and drew the shades over the windows.

“The sun will come up soon,” said Dave. “Drawing all the shades might raise more eyebrows than if we just tried to lie low.”

“I don’t give a fuck about raising eyebrows.”

“Then why draw the shades at all.”

Tim walked back to the office area, and returned with the Bag of Holding. “Just like you said, Dave. The sun will be up soon.” He put his hand in the bag. “Katherine.” He winced at the feel of her cold, dead wrist, and even more as her nails dug into his living, nerve-filled wrist. He pulled her out of the bag.

Katherine bared her fangs and hissed, crouching in a defensive position. Her demeanor relaxed as it dawned on her where she was. Her fangs slowly receded as her arms and jaw dropped. She scanned the room until her eyes focused on Tim.

“You did it!” she said, grabbing him by the upper arms. She lifted him into the air, smashing his head right through the sheetrock faux ceiling.

“Ow,” said Tim.

“Sorry,” said Katherine, placing him back on the floor. “I forgot how strong I am now that I’m…”

Just as he had for Julian, Tim watched the wheels turn inside his undead sister’s head.

“Why are you still a midget?” she said.

“Halfling,” Tim corrected her.

“All of us,” said Katherine, her voice starting to rise slightly in pitch. “How did we get back home if we’re all still carnival freaks?”

“Calm down, Kat,” said Tim. “That’s just what I was about to ask Professor Goosewaddle.”

“Who the *FUCK* is Professor Goose — wait, isn’t that the guy who makes the bath salts?”

“Um… Professor?”

The professor had his bulbous nose buried in the Third Edition Caverns and Creatures Monster Manual: Volume 1. “This is fascinating. A scientific journal of every creature which inhabits our world, with numeric values assigned to the most curious of details. What is ‘HP’?”

“That stands for Hit Points,” said Julian. “That determines how much of a beating they can take before they die.” He looked very proud of himself.

“A curious statistic indeed.”

“*Professor!*” said Tim.

“Yes, lad,” said Professor Goosewaddle. “Do you have a question?”

“Why aren’t we human?” asked Tim.

The professor closed the book and looked quizzically at Tim. “Why would you expect to be human? Honestly, and no offense meant toward the bard, but why would you want to be?”

“No sweat, bro,” said Chaz.

“We’re back home,” said Tim. “Things were supposed to go back to normal. Look.” He grabbed his cell phone and scrolled through pictures, looking for one that wasn’t just another close-up of a dick they had drawn on Cooper or Dave’s face with a dry-erase marker when they had passed out drunk during game play. He finally found an adequate picture of Cooper. He was still passed out with a dick drawn on his face, but it was snapped from far away enough such that he could be recognized as a human being. “Here.”

The old gnome’s face grew severe as he cradled Tim’s cell phone in his hands. “What *is* this?”

“That’s Cooper,” said Tim, satisfied that he finally had the professor’s undivided attention.

“And this Cooper device,” said Professor Goosewaddle, holding the phone close to his eyes, and then far away. “It has the ability to capture a person’s image? Astounding. Such remarkable clarity and

attention to detail.” He tilted the phone on its side. His eyes grew wide as the image on the screen flipped horizontally. “What sorcery is this!” He cast it away as if it had just turned into a rabid badger.

Tim dove to catch his phone, and was surprised that the effort paid off. His high Dexterity score must still apply even here.

"Careful with that!" he said as he got back to his feet. "Cooper isn't the device. He's the guy in the picture. The same guy who's now the half-orc standing right there." He pointed at Cooper, who was swaying on his feet and staring intently at nothing in particular. "Dude, are you okay?”

“I don’t feel so hot,” said Cooper. An open wound in his belly was oozing something that looked like purple cottage cheese.

“What the hell happened to you?”

“Huh?” Cooper looked down at his belly. “Oh, that. It’s nothing. I got stabbed.” He let out a shallow, wheezy laugh and pulled a dagger out of his bag. “It was that guy called Famine. Stupid fucker left the knife.”

“That looks too serious for a simple stab wound,” said Tim. “Julian, can you Detect Magic on that dagger?”

“Sure thing,” said Julian. He closed his eyes and mumbled a quick incantation. When he opened them again, they glowed white. “There’s nothing magical about that dagger.”

“Let me see that,” said Dave, taking the dagger out of Cooper’s hand. “Detect Poison.” He held the blade close to his eyes for nearly a minute. “There’s a residue on here,” he said. “This is concentrated scorpion venom.”

“I think I need to go shit again,” said Cooper.

“Use the back door,” said Tim. “Just shit behind the building, and try to make sure nobody sees you.”

Cooper staggered toward the back door.

Julian removed Cooper’s character sheet from its tube. “He’s in some serious shit, guys,’ he said. “His Constitution score is down to 9.”

“He got bit by a vampire and stabbed with concentrated scorpion venom,” said Dave. “He’s lucky to be alive at all.”

“Well he won’t be if we don’t act fast,” said Julian. “His Constitution just dropped down to 8.”

“Shit,” said Tim. “We need to find a… dammit, I forgot the word. Taxidermist?”

“You want to have him stuffed?” said Dave.

“No,” said Tim. “A dude who studies poisons.”

“Toxicologist?” suggested Julian.

“That’s the one.”

“Is anyone else getting hot in here?” asked Katherine.

Tim looked at the window. Dawn was breaking and the shaded

windows were getting lighter.

"Kat, you've got to get in the freezer, like right now."

"But I –"

"Not up for negotiation. The sun is coming up. You'll be safe from the light in there." He grabbed her arm and started to lead her to the back of the store. The next thing he knew, he was on the other side of the room, his back slammed into the side of the drink cooler.

"I can find my own way, thanks," said Katherine. "If I may finish what I was saying, I didn't come here alone."

Tim stood up and tried to stretch the pain out of his back. "What are you talking about?"

Katherine picked up the Bag of Holding, looked inside, turned it upside down and shook it. "How does this thing work?"

"You put your hand inside and speak the name of the thing you're looking for. Katherine, what are you looking for?"

"There's someone else in the bag."

"What?" said Julian.

"Oh no," said Dave. "You don't mean…"

Katherine reached into the bag. "Ginfizzle."

"Who the fuck is Ginfizzle?" asked Tim.

Dave sighed. "He's the halfling who ambushed us in the woods after we left Millard's fort."

"Katherine!" said Tim. "We didn't put him in there to keep you company. You were supposed to eat that guy."

"I did," said Katherine, pulling a snarling, writhing former-halfling out of the bag. "He turned."

"Take it easy, Ginny," said Katherine. "It's me."

At once, the undead midget turned calm. He held the hand that Katherine had retrieved him with, and wrapped his other arm around her leg. He cowered behind her as he took stock of what must have been some very unfamiliar surroundings.

"Where are we, Master? What is this place?"

Katherine stroked his dirty, matted hair. "We're safe, dear. Don't worry. *Nobody's going to hurt you.*" The last sentence was clearly meant more for everyone else's ears than for Ginfizzle's.

"It's nice to see you've made a friend, Kat," said Tim.

Katherine squinted as the morning light penetrated more densely through the blinds. She took Ginfizzle into a shadowy corner. "We'll retire to the freezer. We'll need to eat when we wake up. Something alive."

Tim shivered. "I'll see what I can come up with."

Katherine opened the freezer door. "Jesus Christ!" she said. "It smells like — Oh God! Did someone take a shit in here?"

"Oh right," said Tim. "Sorry about that. Mordred took a dump on

the floor just before he left."

"And the puke?"

Tim lowered his head. "That's mine."

"Wait a second," said Katherine. "Mordred's alive? Why aren't you going after him?"

"We're working on it!"

"Well excuse me!" Katherine snapped back at him, her canine teeth growing just a little longer and sharper. "You could have at least cleaned up the shit and vomit!"

"Why don't you get your new best friend to do it?"

Katherine's teeth retracted to their normal size. "Not a bad idea." She grabbed a bucket, a mop, a sponge, and a bottle of industrial strength green cleaning liquid. "Oh Ginny!"

"I live only to serve you, Master!"

The two vampires retired into the freezer. Tim let out a satisfied sigh when the latch locked shut behind them. He wasn't sure if Katherine trusted him to let her out or if she just forgot about the broken latch, and he didn't care. Those were two headaches he could postpone until he was ready for them. Tim rejoined the party in the dining area.

"Oh, don't you even get me going." Professor Goosewaddle was in a heated exchange with Julian. "You're listed here as being proficient with every type of weapon there is, and you get a bonus to Listen, Search, and Spot checks, whatever in the Abyss those are."

"You've got racial benefits as well," said Julian.

"Oh sure!" said the professor. "Let's have a look at those again, shall we?" He flipped over to the appropriate page. "*Size* bonus to AC and attack rolls! *Size* bonus to Hide checks!" He jabbed his finger into the book every time he said 'size'. "Bonus to attack rolls against *kobolds* and*goblinoids*! AC bonus against *giants*! Every bonus I get comes either from being short or a bigot."

"Are you saying you've got nothing against kobolds?"

"Of course not," said Professor Goosewaddle, keeping his eyes on the book. "I mean, not the *good* ones."

"Would you be okay with your daughter marrying a kobold?"

"That's preposterous!" said the professor.

Julian crossed his arms with a look of smug satisfaction.

"What?" the professor exclaimed. "They're not even mammals!"

Julian relaxed his arms. "Well I guess you've sort of got me there."

"It doesn't matter," said Tim. "We're all humans anyway."

Professor Goosewaddle frowned at Tim. "What is this sad obsession you have with being a human? What's so special about being a human? I've had farts that have lingered longer than a human lifespan."

“So have I,” said Cooper, returning from the back of the store. “You guys will probably want to stick to the front entrance from now on.”

Professor Goosewaddle grimaced. “I was being hyperbolic.” He flipped through the book. “I think I know what the problem is. Let’s see what this ridiculous book has to say about humans.” He settled on a particular section of the book, flipped a few pages forward, and then a few pages back. “They don’t seem to be listed here. It goes straight from ‘Howler’ to ‘Hydra’.”

“That’s because you’re looking at the Monster Manual,” explained Dave. “Humans aren’t considered monsters.” Professor Goosewaddle’s wide-eyed, open-mouthed stare required further comment. “Um… That came out wrong.”

“I’m not so sure that it did!” said the professor. “It’s no wonder you’re all ashamed of who you are, reading this kind of…” He slammed the book shut and held it up. “Whatever this is!” He looked sternly around the room. “I’ll bet my shop that a human wrote this book.”

“I’d say that’s a safe bet,” said Dave.

Professor Goosewaddle examined the front cover of the book. “Hmph! Larry Lilacs. That’s a human name if I ever heard one.”

“Of course it’s a human name,” said Tim. “Everyone in this world is human. We were sent to your world by means of a magic that we don’t understand. We were playing this game, you see, and –”

“Playing games with forces you don’t understand is a good way to get yourselves in trouble,” said the professor.

Dave rolled his eyes. “Oh my God. It’s the eighties all over again.”

“Here’s the thing,” said Tim. “The magic dice sent us to your world and changed our human bodies into what you see before you. When you brought us back, we expected we would return to our human forms.”

The professor furrowed his brow. “It was a simple teleport spell. There were no transmutative properties to it.”

“This is pointless,” said Julian. “Mordred’s alive. He’s got the dice and the knowledge of how to use them. We find Mordred, our problems are solved.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” asked Tim.

“We’ll look for him,” said Julian. “We know he lives in Biloxi, and that he’s got a broken rear windshield. We can get online, make some educated guesses, stakeout some auto places. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Sounds like a long shot,” said Dave.

“I can’t wait until you have your first idea,” snapped Julian. “I'll be the first in a long line to tell you how stupid it is.”

“Knock it off, you two,” said Tim. “We’ve got bigger and more immediate problems. Cooper needs medical attention. Dave, you get

on your phone and locate the nearest poison control center, or toxicology clinic, or whatever you can find." He pushed a chair up against the counter, climbed up, opened the cash register, and pulled out two twenty-dollar bills. "Chaz, take this and buy a big bag of dog food for Butterbean."

"Where the hell am I supposed to find dog food at this hour?"

"Try the shop next door," said Tim. "The old couple that runs it are always up at the ass crack of dawn. I think the husband might even sleep there some nights."

Chaz took the money and left.

"Next step," said Tim. "We need to sort out transportation. I'm thinking our safest bet is a large, windowless van."

Julian let out a halfhearted laugh. "Does anyone know any pedophiles?"

"Brilliant," said Tim.

"What?" said Dave.

"It was only a lame joke," said Julian.

"It's perfect," said Tim. "Julian, get on the office computer and check out the local sex offender registry. One of those fuckers is bound to have just what we're looking for parked right in their driveway."

"You can't be serious," said Dave.

"Did you find anything yet?"

"Why don't we just get Professor Goosewaddle to teleport back to the shop with Cooper. Maybe he's got an antidote, or he could take him to see a higher level cleric or –"

"Absolutely not," said Tim. "The second we cross back over, Mordred will be in control, and he will squash us like bugs. No monsters, no contrived storylines. Just a big fucking thumb from out of the sky. Now did you find a place or not?"

Dave looked down at his phone. "I'm still working on it."

"Then work on it!" said Tim. "Cooper, how are you holding up?"

Cooper looked listlessly down at his character sheet. "My Constitution is still 8, but I don't feel so good."

"We're running out of time," said Tim. "We're going to have to split up."

"I found something!" said Dave. "Bayside Poison Control, in Old Town Bay St. Louis."

"That's thirty minutes away from here," said Tim. "You couldn't find anything closer?"

"Nothing that wasn't part of a major hospital," said Dave. "I figured we'd be safer with a smaller clinic than trying to escort a half-orc through the halls of Gulfport Memorial."

Tim nodded. "Good thinking."

The bell jingled as the front door burst open, and Tim nearly

jumped out of his skin.

"Whoa, chill out dude," said Chaz, struggling to carry a forty pound bag of dog food. "It's just me."

"You scared the shit out of me," said Tim. "I thought it was a customer. Lock the door behind you." He retreated to the kitchen for some bowls.

"What are you guys doing?" asked Chaz, following Tim.

"We're looking for pedophiles," said Julian.

Chaz placed the dog food on the counter. "Are you sure that's the most productive possible use of our time?"

"Holy crap," said Julian, the sharp features of his elven face illuminated by the light of the computer screen. "These little side streets off Pass Road are lit up like it's some kind of pedo community. Ew… I've delivered pizza to some of these addresses."

"Perfect," said Tim. "Print out a map." He spotted Katherine's gym bag in the corner, unzipped it, and pulled out an elastic headband. "Here," he said, handing the headband to Julian. "You can't keep walking around in that stupid sombrero, but you still need to cover your ears. You and Chaz are the only ones who will be able to pass for humans of driving age."

Julian put on the headband. "How's that?"

"You look like Jane Fonda. Do you have a Papa Joe's hat in your car?"

"Yeah."

"Good," said Tim. "Wear it. Take Cooper and Professor Goosewaddle to the toxicology clinic in Bay St. Louis in your car. How's your phone battery?"

"Low," said Julian. "But I've got a charger in the car."

Tim grabbed his keys off the desk and walked out of the office, back into the dining area. "Chaz, you and Dave are coming with me. We're going on a trip to Pedo-topia."

"What's up with the pedophiles?" asked Chaz. "Are you looking to get laid?"

"I'll explain on the way," said Tim, tossing Chaz the keys. "You're driving."

Chapter 2

“I’m sorry it’s got to be this way, Cooper,” said Julian, holding open the trunk of his mom's Volkswagen Passat.

“It’s cool,” said Cooper, shoving the tire-change kit to one side.

“Cops will arrest a guy for being black around here,” said Julian. “If they saw you, I think they’d just open fire.”

Cooper climbed into the trunk, rested his head on the tire-change kit, and curled into a fetal position. “I said it’s cool. I don’t mind riding in the trunk.”

“And there are my back seats to consider,” said Julian. “I mean, I’d prefer you didn’t soil yourself in the trunk either, but it’s easier to –”

“Dude, stop talking.”

“Okay, here we go. Watch your fingers.” Julian closed the trunk then opened the front passenger door. “Come on, Professor. Hop in.”

“What sort of carriage is this?” asked Professor Goosewaddle. “Shall I summon some steeds to pull it?”

“I’ll take care of it,” said Julian. “Just get in and sit down.”

The professor cautiously crawled up onto the passenger’s seat. Julian closed the door behind him, walked around the front of the car to the driver’s side, and looked up into the sky.

“Ravenus?” Julian called out.

“Right here, sir,” said Ravenus, circling down from around the other side of the Chicken Hut.

“I thought you were on the beach scrounging for food.”

“I had a look.”

“Did you find anything you liked.”

“Bits and bobs, sir.”

Julian opened the back door of his car. “I’m going to need you to ride in back. “In fact, it’s probably best if you stay down on the floor behind my seat, just so nobody sees you. We’re trying to keep a low profile. Is that okay?”

“I live only to serve you, master Julian.” Ravenus hopped into the back footwell.

Julian closed the door behind Ravenus and got into driver’s seat. He leaned past the professor and pulled the seatbelt over him.

“What is the meaning of this?” Professor Goosewaddle demanded. Julian only just got the belt clicked into place as the professor tried to squirm his way out of it. “I’m warning you, elf! Release me this instant, or so help me!” His tiny right hand glowed red as a ball of fire grew in the palm.

“Dude, chill out!” said Julian. “It’s just to keep you safe. Look, I’m wearing one, too.” He pulled his own seatbelt across his chest and

clicked it into place.

"Oh," said the professor. He closed his hand around the fiery sphere, and the inside of the car became dark once again. "Sorry."

Julian turned the key in the ignition. The engine rumbled to life. Professor Goosewaddle pressed his lips together, as if trying to hold back a torrent of questions. When Julian put the car into gear and pulled out of the parking space, the gnomish professor cried out.

"By the gods, it moves!"

Julian smiled. "Oh, it moves all right. You ain't seen nothing yet." He shifted to second gear and pulled out onto Highway 90. He stayed in second gear a little while longer than he normally would have while he accelerated, enjoying the wide-eyed shock on Goosewaddle's face. Then he cycled up to fifth gear as he approached his target speed of a non-suspicious five miles-per-hour over the speed limit.

"What manner of sorcery propels this vehicle?" asked the professor, running a finger across the cracked vinyl of the interior door handle.

"Um…" said Julian, unsure of how to answer. "Internal combustion?"

"Fireballs?"

"Sure."

"Sir," said Ravenus from the rear footwell.

"Yeah?" said Julian. "What's up, Ravenus?"

"There are some snacks down here. Would you mind if I helped myself to some of them?"

"Since when do you eat people snacks?"

"They're dead bugs."

"Ew," said Julian. He really needed to clean his car more often. "Knock yourself out."

"If the vehicle is propelled by fireballs exploding inside it," said Professor Goosewaddle, "then how is it that we, too, are not exploding?"

"Listen, Professor," said Julian. "I know all of this is very strange to you, and that you have a lot of questions. But I'm not equipped to answer those questions. We live in a world where very smart people, scientists and engineers, make things so that the rest of us stupid people don't have to understand how they work. It's great for us. It allows us to have all sorts of luxuries without having the first clue as to how they work."

Professor Goosewaddle frowned. "That sounds dangerous."

"Here's an example," said Julian. "Do you like music?"

"What a peculiar question," said the professor. "I don't know of anyone who actively dislikes music.

"Okay, good. Just sit back and enjoy." Julian, keeping his eyes on the road, fumbled around behind the back seat until his hand found

his CD binder. He pulled out a random CD. *The Pixies: Doolittle*. He nodded to himself in approval. There couldn't be a better introduction to the music of Earth. He slipped the disc into the slot. They were only about five seconds into *Debaser* when Professor Goosewaddle flipped the fuck out.

"What is this?" cried the professor. "Make it stop!" He leaned forward, stretching his little gnome arm out to punch random buttons on the car's center console.

"Hey!" said Julian. "Knock it off!"

"I feel the icy breath of the spirits within!"

"You just turned on the air conditioner, you idiot." Julian slapped the professor's hand away and turned off both the AC and the music. "Now just sit back and behave yourself. Don't touch anything."

They drove in silent peace for a good thirty seconds or so before the passenger's side window went down. Julian glanced to his right. The professor had found the window button. No harm in that, really. As long as he didn't actually try to jump out the window, it was harmless. And he supposed they could use some fresh air.

And then the window went back up.

And then down.

And then up.

And then down again.

And then up again.

Julian made it through about six more cycles of this before he lost his shit. "STOP! Just stop it already! It goes up, it goes down! You've cracked the code! You've unraveled the mystery! Just please sit still for five more minutes!"

Bayside Poison Control was easy enough to find. It looked to be a fairly new building in a part of town that had otherwise not seen much construction after hurricane Katrina had wiped the place flat. The only other car in the small parking lot beside the building was an early 90's era Toyota Corolla. Not really what Julian expected a doctor to drive. Maybe toxicologists weren't paid as well as neurosurgeons. Maybe he was just frugal. It didn't matter. They were here. Julian parked the car, pulled up the handbrake, turned off the engine, and removed the key.

"I'll just be a minute," Julian said to Professor Goosewaddle and Ravenus. "I'm just going to run around front and see if this place is open." He pointed at the professor. "Don't touch anything."

If not for the sign out front and the fact that it had a modest parking lot, the building could have easily been mistaken for a quaint suburban house. It had yellow siding, green-shuttered windows, and a friendly red door. A plaque to the side of the door read "Harvey Baxter PhD Toxicology". This was the place, all right. Julian turned

the knob. It turned freely. That was good. The door was unlocked, which meant the place was open. He pushed the door open and started to step inside.

HONK! HONK! HONK! HONK! Julian's car alarm was competing for attention with The Pixies' Doolittle album. *Fuck.*

Julian ran back around to the side of the building. His car was not where he had parked it, not even facing the same direction. It had swerved to the side and backed into the Corolla. The windshield wipers were flapping back and forth as fast as they could go. The hazard lights were flashing on and off. The gas tank and trunk were both wide open. *Cooper!*

"Goosewaddle!" Julian cried. "What are you doing?"

The professor, still in his seat, opened the window. "I'm sorry. I got bored."

"I wasn't even gone a minute!" said Julian. "How did you turn on the car? I took the keys out!"

"It was nothing," said the professor, looking mighty pleased with himself. "A small, focused modification of a Lightning Bolt spell into the keyhole did just the trick."

"Well make it stop!"

The professor snapped his fingers and the car fell silent.

"What the hell is going on out here?" shouted a voice much younger and more female than Julian had anticipated. "It's seven o'clock in the – my car!"

"Don't make a fucking sound!" Julian whispered at the professor. He whirled around, trying to obscure the woman's view of Professor Goosewaddle while scanning around for any signs of Cooper, hoping desperately not to find any.

A young woman glared at him with striking green eyes. Her hair was an explosion of auburn curls, no doubt exacerbated by the humidity. She wasn't exactly what he expected Dr. Harvey Baxter to look like. But she had a lab coat on, and that was credentials enough for him.

"Um," said Julian. "Sorry about that. I'll pay for that."

"You're goddamn right you will, amigo," said the woman in the lab coat.

"Huh?" said Julian. "Oh right, the serape, and the… This isn't… I can… Um, are you Dr. Baxter?"

"Do I look like a Harvey Baxter to you?"

"No, I just thought –"

"I'm his assistant," said the woman. "Dr. Baxter won't be in until ten. My name is Stacy. What do you want?"

"I, uh…" said Julian. "I've been poisoned. I got stung by a scorpion."

Stacy put her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"You don't appear to be in a lot of pain."

"I mask my feelings because I'm insecure?"

"Know what I think?" asked Stacy. "I think you're full of crap. Show me where the scorpion stung you."

"Okay, I lied," said Julian. "It wasn't me. It was a friend. I need to get a dose of scorpion anti-venom and I'll get out of your hair."

"This isn't a supermarket," said Stacy. "You don't just walk in and pick up some scorpion venom. It's more complicated than that. Where is this *friend* of yours anyway?"

Julian was losing ground. It was time to pull out the big guns. "Listen, Stacy," he said. "I know I've made a bad first impression. But my friend is in some serious shit. If I don't help him, he's going to die." He hoped that the fact that he was telling the truth would lower the Difficulty Class on his attempt at Diplomacy.

Stacy crossed her arms and stared at him for a moment. "Fine," she said. "Come on in. I need to get your insurance information anyway."

Julian turned back to give Professor Goosewaddle a warning glance, then followed Stacy back to the front of the building.

The interior matched the exterior's suburban home theme. The waiting room was furnished with comfortable, orange sofas on opposite walls. A coffee table sat between them, stocked with an assortment of science and wildlife magazines. The beige linoleum floor shone like the surface of an operating table.

"Sit down," said Stacy.

"I'm sorry," said Julian. "Time is kind of a factor here. Can you at least tell me whether you have any scorpion venom antidote here or not?"

"It's not that simple," said Stacy. "And I'm still not sure I believe you."

"What kind of scam do you think I'm trying to pull here?" said Julian. "Why would I be asking you about scorpion anti-venom if I didn't really need it? Are the kids using it recreationally these days or something?"

"Do you even know what kind of scorpion stung your friend?"

Julian shrugged. "I'm guessing *dire*."

"What?"

"It doesn't matter," Julian pleaded. "We'll take whatever you've got."

"It most certainly *does* matter," said Stacy, walking into a large office. The name stenciled on the opaque glass was Harvey Baxter. Julian followed her. "If you use the anti-venom from the wrong type

of scorpion, it'll probably have no effect whatsoever. It might even do more harm than good."

"Well can we make some?"

"Make some?"

"Yeah, just give me a list of ingredients or whatever and we'll whip up a batch. What's in anti-venom? Vitamin C? Riboflavin? Yellow Number 5? Sprite? What?"

She walked around a desk to the window behind it and pulled the cord to raise the blinds, smiling back at Julian and shaking her head. "Riboflavin?"

When the blinds went up, Cooper was standing, like the giant monstrous dumbass that he was, right there in the window.

"Oh shit!" said Julian. Catching himself before she had the time to turn around, he pointed to the first thing his eyes could find, an open can of Diet Dr. Pepper on the desk. "You're drinking soda this early in the morning?"

"What?" said Stacy. "I'm not a coffee person." Cooper ducked out of the way just before she turned back to the window. She lifted it open. "Whew? What's that smell?" She closed the window again.

"So," said Julian. "Back to the topic at hand?"

"You don't make anti-venom like you make a fruitcake," said Stacy. "It needs to be made inside a living organism. They usually use a horse, an animal big enough to shrug off a small dose of the venom. They inject the venom into the animal, and its body creates the anti-venom naturally. Then scientists extract it from their blood. It's not all that complicated, really. The horse does all of the heavy lifting."

"So you're saying if I had a horse and the right kind of scorpion, we could make some ant-venom?"

Stacy looked at him curiously. "Well theoretically, I suppose, but it _"

"Hold that thought," said Julian. "I'll be right back."

Julian bolted out of and around the side of the building as fast as he could. When Professor Goosewaddle saw him, he put his hands up innocently. Julian ran to the car and opened the professor's door. "I need your help."

"Whatever I can do," said the professor.

"Do you have any monster summoning spells?"

"Of course! What do you need?"

"Good man," said Julian. "Come with me." He led the professor back to the front door of the building. "Listen, Professor. The woman you're about to meet has never seen a gnome before, so forgive her if she seems a little uncomfortable."

Professor Goosewaddle nodded his head. "I understand." They walked into the waiting room.

“Stay here,” said Julian. He walked to the doorway of Dr. Baxter's office and knocked lightly. “Stacy?”

“Come on in.”

Julian opened the door, but remained in the doorway. “Stacy, I’d like to introduce you to my um… grandfather.”

“Your grandfather is with you?”

“Listen,” said Julian. “Let me give you a little heads up so you’re not freaked out by him.”

“Freaked out?”

“You see,” said Julian. “He’s short and kind of deformed.”

Stacy stood up and stomped toward the doorway. “Now what kind of way is that to talk about your own – oh my. Hello, sir.”

“How do you do?” said Professor Goosewaddle.

Stacy glared at Julian. “Why he’s just adorable! Shame on you.” She bent over and extended her hand to the professor. “My name is Stacy Swanson. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr…”

“*Professor* Goosewaddle,” said Professor Goosewaddle, enthusiastically accepting her handshake.

“I beg your pardon,” said Stacy. “Please come into the office where it’s cooler.”

They followed Stacy into the office and Julian closed the door behind them.

“So, Professor,” said Stacy. “What is it you’re a professor of?”

“I dabble in a bit of everything, but my specialties are Illusion and Enchantment.”

Stacy opened the door of the mini-fridge in the corner of the office and looked inside. “Can I offer you something to drink? All I’ve got is diet Dr. Pepper, but I don’t think Dr. Baxter would mind if you had one of his root beers.”

“I’d love a root beer,” said Julian.

“And you, Professor?”

Professor Goosewaddle gave Julian a panicked look. Julian nodded.

“That would be lovely,” said the professor.

“I’m still unclear as to what you think I can do for you,” said Stacy, gathering soda cans to her chest. “Like I said before, you need a –”

“Horse,” said Julian. A white mare speckled with brown appeared in the office.

“Well yes,” said Stacy, closing the refrigerator door and standing up straight. “But that’s only part of – Jesus Christ!”

“I’m sorry, Miss Swanson,” said Julian. “I know this all seems very strange to you, but we’re desperate.”

“Where the hell did that horse come from?”

“Don’t mind the horse,” said Julian. “Just brace yourself for what’s next. Try not to freak out.” He looked down at Professor Goosewaddle.

“We need a giant scorpion to attack the horse. Can you do that?”

“What?” said Stacy.

“Not a problem,” said the professor. He waved his arms above his head. “Tetraethyl Orthosilicate!” A black scorpion, only just smaller than the horse, appeared between it and the desk.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?” screamed Stacy.

The horse kicked at the scorpion, but missed. Its hoof connected with the Diet Dr. Pepper can, sending it smashing through the window.

“Ow!” Cooper shouted from outside.

Stacy’s back was pressed against the wall. She threw a can of root beer at the scorpion. It hissed and turned toward her, its giant, clawed feet tapping the linoleum floor.

The scorpion had already set its sights on Stacy. The tip of the stinger on its tail glistened with beads of venom. It crouched down on its front legs, raising its rear ones, and rammed its tail down toward her. She dove under the desk as the stinger plunged through the door of the mini fridge.

“Professor!” said Julian, ducking behind a chair in the corner of the room. “Make it attack the horse!”

“Attack the horse!” Professor Goosewaddle commanded the scorpion.

The scorpion ripped the door right off of the mini fridge, sending the rest of the appliance sailing across the office, smashing into a bookcase against the opposite wall. Diet Dr. Pepper cans and Barq’s Root Beer cans flew everywhere, along with a few cups of yogurt, a salad, and dozens of hypodermic needles. The massive scorpion snapped its front claws, then tore into the horse’s flesh, lifting it off the floor before driving its stinger into the horse’s side.

The horse whinnied in pain, then vanished.

“Goddammit,” said Julian. “You weren’t supposed to kill it. We just need to poison it.”

“Sorry,” said Professor Goosewaddle.

The scorpion thrashed its tail around, trying to shake the refrigerator door loose. It smashed a picture on the wall.

“Let’s try again,” said Julian. “Horse.” A shorter, but stockier, black draft horse appeared. “No claws this time, Professor. Just make it use its tail. And just once.”

“Be a good boy, Mr. Scorpion,” said the professor. “Give the horse a nice solid sting, would you?”

The scorpion obediently plunged its stinger into the horse’s side. The horse screamed and kicked, but fortunately did not disappear.

“Now get rid of the scorpion!” said Julian.

The professor snapped his fingers. The scorpion disappeared and

the broken refrigerator door clattered onto the floor, bursting a cup of yogurt.

"It's okay, Miss Swanson," said Julian. "You can come out now. The scorpion is gone."

Stacy tentatively peeked her head over the top of the desk. "Why is there a different horse here? What the hell is going on?"

The horse was in bad shape, blood dripping from the wound in its side. It groaned and shat on the floor.

"We're sorry about the mess," said Julian. "This might have worked better as an outdoor project."

"Is everyone okay?" asked Cooper. He stood in the doorway with a black eye, holding a dented can of Diet Dr. Pepper. "I heard screaming."

Stacy screamed again and threw her remaining root beer can at Cooper. "WHAT ARE YOU?"

Cooper caught the can before it could blacken his other eye. "Fucking hell, lady," he said. "Don't you know how to fight with anything but soda cans? Oh hey, Barq's. Sweet!" He held up the dented Diet Dr. Pepper can. "You know they say this tastes just like regular Dr. Pepper, but that's bullshit. This stuff tastes like ass." He pierced the root beer can with a tusk and sucked out the liquid.

"Somebody better tell me what the fuck is going on before I really start to lose my shit!" said Stacy.

"Miss Swanson," said Julian. "This is my friend Cooper. He's the one that was poisoned." He gestured at Cooper's foaming wound. "We'll be happy to answer all of your questions just as soon as we get him healed up. Now we've got a poisoned horse. What's the next step?"

Stacy stepped carefully over soda cans, broken glass, and syringes, inching her way toward the exit. "Now you need to wait about ten weeks for the antibodies to build up in the horse's blood."

"We don't have that kind of time!" said Julian. "The spell duration on that horse has less than two hours to go, and Cooper might have even less time than that."

"I may be able to help," said Professor Goosewaddle. "I've been working on an aging spell. I haven't worked out all of the finer details, but what I've got so far might serve our purposes."

"How's that?" asked Julian.

"If I can magically age the horse, its body will go through the processes you require within the time frame of the Mount spell."

"Good enough for me, Prof. Have at it."

Professor Goosewaddle placed a hand on the horse's front leg. "Furfuryl Furfurate."

The horse's eyes immediately began to glaze over. Its body

withered, skin stretching around its bones. Its wound grew wider and festered rapidly. And then the horse blinked out of existence altogether.

"What the hell just happened?" asked Julian.

"Interesting," said the professor, stroking his beard. "It would appear that the horse starved to death. I'll make a note of it."

"What's the point of an aging spell if it doesn't account for nourishment?"

"I said it wasn't perfected yet," said the professor. "Trial and error, lad. Trial and error."

"Well shit," said Julian. "You killed another horse. Now what do we do?"

Stacy made her move, bolting for the exit.

Cooper stepped in her way, but looked like he was only barely able to keep on his feet. "Not so fast, lady." He leaned against the door frame. Urine trickled down his leg, forming a brown puddle around his foot.

"Shit," said Julian. "His kidneys are giving out. He's out of time. Stacy, we need a scorpion anti-venom right now."

"Take as many as you want," said Stacy. "They're all over the floor." Her voice was shaky. "Just let me go. Please!"

Julian picked up a few syringes off the floor. "These are all scientific names. I don't know what any of them mean. Just help me find one for a scorpion, and you can go."

Stacy got down on her hands and knees, picking up and discarding a few syringes before she found a satisfactory one. "Here," she said, standing up and handing the syringe to Julian. "*Vaejovis Carolinianus*. It's a scorpion. Nothing like the thing that trashed this office, but it's all we've got."

Cooper slid down the doorframe to a sitting position, wheezing a hollow laugh. "Anus."

Julian ripped the plastic wrapper off of the syringe, uncapped the needle, and stabbed it into Cooper's gut, pressing down on the plunger.

Cooper's eyes rolled up in his head. He collapsed prone on the floor, his body convulsing. When he finally lay still, he let out a long, steady fart that Julian feared might be his spirit departing from his body.

"I'm sorry, honey" said Stacy. "I told you it was a longshot. There was nothing more you could've done."

Professor Goosewaddle removed his cap and held it to his chest.

Cooper opened his eyes. "Is it okay if I smoke in here?"

"Cooper!" cried Julian. "You're okay!"

"Not quite," said Cooper, sitting up. "I still feel a little –" He belched up a gob of brown phlegm. "Oh, there it is. Yeah, I'm ship

shape."

"Ha!" said Julian. He grinned at Stacy. "You could have saved us a lot of time and trouble, Doc, if you'd just given us the antidote in the first place."

"But I don't understand," said Stacy. "That couldn't have worked so quickly. It shouldn't have worked at all. Wait, what the hell *are* all you people?"

Chapter 3

Tim experienced two new sensations on the way to Pass Road. He'd never before ridden shotgun in his own car, and he'd never before ridden in any car as a halfling. He had to stretch his neck to see over the dashboard.

"All right," he said to Chaz, who was driving. "Slow down. We're coming up on the first side street on the map." He the map he'd printed out at the Chicken Hut. Four of the ten red circles in the neighborhood were on Ganders Road. That would be their first, and hopefully last, stop.

Chaz turned the car onto Ganders Road. Two large, windowless vans were immediately visible.

"I can't believe this actually worked," said Dave from the back seat. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"That one," said Tim, pointing to a house on the left side of the quiet street. "That house is marked on the map. Pull up in front of there."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just continue driving in two cars?" asked Chaz.

"Never split the party," said Tim. "It's bad enough we're split right now. God only knows what kind of disaster Cooper is causing. We need a Mystery Machine to keep everyone together until we find Mordred. Anyway, Katherine and her new friend are going to need to eat. Can you think of anything better than a pedo?"

"I don't know," said Chaz. "A stray dog maybe?"

"Dogs don't drive vans," said Tim.

"Or fuck kids," added Dave.

"You don't know this guy's story," said Chaz. "What if he's on the sex offender list for something stupid, like pissing on the fence at a playground on his way home from a bar or something?"

"I predicted the van, didn't I?"

"That doesn't mean anything!" said Chaz. "Lots of people drive vans. It's not like they're manufactured specifically to cater to the child-molester demographic."

"We're not going to hurt him right away," said Tim. "We're just going to bring him along to make sure he doesn't report his vehicle stolen. If we don't get a pedo-vibe from him, we'll send him on his way after we find Mordred."

Chaz sighed. "Fine. So what's the plan? We just barge into this guy's house and kidnap him?"

"Do you have the Charm Person spell?"

"Yeah."

“Good,” said Tim. “Start driving. I don’t want my car to be identified.”

They pulled into the parking lot of a nearby Rouse’s. There were a few cars, probably belonging to the opening crew, but it was still too early for the store to be open. Chaz parked the car at the back of the lot, near a dumpster. He and Tim got out.

"Bring your lute," Tim said to Chaz.

"Should I bring my mace?" asked Dave.

"Sorry Dave," said Tim. "You're going to have to stay here."

“What happened to *‘Never split the party’*?”

“Chaz and I can pass for human at a casual glance,” said Tim. “You look like a Ren Faire Santa Claus. Just hang out here, lie low, and we’ll come back for you with the van.”

Tim led Chaz back to their target’s house. To save time and keep out of view as best they could, they hopped over chain-link fences and cut through backyards as much as possible. They got barked at by a few dogs, but made it back to the house without any problems.

“Remember,” said Chaz. “We try the spell first.”

“Agreed,” said Tim. “But if it doesn’t work, we’ll have to jump him. Don’t let him close the door.”

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

Chaz rang the doorbell. The better part of a minute passed, and Chaz was about to try again when the peephole in the door darkened. The deadbolt turned and the door opened inward. A man stood in a loosely-tied threadbare bathrobe. He might have been handsome a few years ago. He had the look of someone who used to be muscular, but had let it go to flab. His black hair was oily and sticking up. His facial hair was somewhere between intentional beard and neglect. He sucked the end of a joint as he eyed Chaz. He gave Tim a quick scowl, licked his lips, and looked back up at Chaz.

“The fuck do you want?” he said, blowing a cloud of marijuana smoke into Chaz’s face.

Chaz looked down at Tim. Tim nodded. Chaz began strumming his lute and singing Marvin Gaye’s *Let’s Get It On*.

“*That’s* the Charm Person spell?” asked Tim. It seemed more like a cruel joke.

Chaz went on singing. Much to Tim’s surprise, the alleged pedophile didn’t slam the door in their faces. Eventually, he even started bobbing his head to the beat and placed the end of his joint between Chaz’s lips.

“I’m Randy,” said the man in the robe.

“God I hope that’s your name,” said Tim.

Chaz took a long drag on the joint and exhaled slowly as his the

music faded. “I’m Chaz. Dude, our car broke down. Can you give us a lift in your van?”

“No sweat, bro,” said Randy. “Let me go grab my keys.”

Five minutes later the van pulled up next to Tim’s car in the Rouse’s parking lot. Tim had spent the whole ride in the middle, rubbing thighs with a suspected child molester and staring uncomfortably at a large jar of Vaseline on the dashboard.

“Well here we are,” said Chaz.

“Would you please get the fuck out,” said Tim, nudging him with his elbow.

Tim scrambled out after him, a shower and a change of clothes now the two highest items on his To-Do list.

Dave didn’t wait for an invitation. The rear driver’s side door opened and two thick, booted feet stepped onto the pavement.

“Far out!” said Randy. “What, are you guys in the circus or something?"

"Randy, this is Dave," said Chaz. "Dave, Randy."

"Um..." said Dave. "Yo."

"You mind if we open the back doors?" said Tim.

"You got it, little man," said Randy, opening the doors.

Much to Tim's surprise, the interior of the rear part of the van was not stocked from top to bottom with rolls of duct tape, plastic sheets, and rope. On the contrary, it was mostly empty. The sides were lined with paint cans, and there were racks for brushes and rollers. As expected, there was white dried liquid splattered on the walls and floor, but there were other colors as well, suggesting that it was paint. A stack of used paint-roller trays stood against the wall against the driver's seat, and wooden paint-stirrers stuck to old newspapers on the floor. If this was just a cover vehicle, it was an impressive ruse.

Chaz and Randy had to help Dave into the van.

"Damn, bro," said Randy, admiring Dave's mace. "That's some medieval shit, yo. But what's up with the arm?"

Dave slammed the door on his side shut.

"Shit," said Randy. "Sorry, dude. He clapped his hands once. "Okay, so who wants to ride back here with Mr. Grumpypants, and who wants to sit up front with me?"

"I'll sit up front," said Tim.

"Wouldn't you rather sit in the back?" Chaz said very suggestively.

"No," said Tim. "I don't think I would."

Chaz turned to Randy. "Would you give us a moment?"

"Take your time," Randy said cheerily. He walked up front and got in the driver's seat.

"What are you doing?" said Chaz. "What if he makes a move on you?"

"I'm not so sure anymore that this guy's a pedo," said Tim. "And anyway, do you know how long that Charm Person spell lasts?"

"No."

"Well what if it runs out and he starts to lose his shit?" asked Tim. "I'm a more powerful fighter than you."

Chaz glared angrily at Tim for a moment and then hung his head. "That's so demoralizing."

"It's okay," said Tim. "You're a support character."

Chaz climbed into the back of the van and closed the door behind him. Tim hopped up front.

"Seat belts!" said Randy.

Tim buckled his seat belt. Randy started up the van.

"Just get on Highway 90 and head west toward Bay St. Louis."

"You sure don't talk like no kid I ever met."

"I had a hard childhood," said Tim. It wasn't true, but he had to say something. He hoped it would end there.

"I got a nephew about your age," said Randy. "But he's dumb as shit. All he ever wants to talk about is them goddamn Pokey-Man cards and shit."

Tim rolled down the window. The air smelled like home. The salt of the gulf, but with a hint of fast food. It was good to be back. They drove past a Dunkin Donuts where a cop was getting into his squad car. Tim gave him a friendly wave. The officer didn't wave back. He just stared open-mouthed at Tim through mirrored sunglasses.

Tim frowned and sat back. *What the fuck was that all about? Had the cop identified him as a halfling*?

They had just pulled onto Highway 90 when Tim glanced in the side mirror. The cop car was tailing them.

"Shit!" said Tim. "Dude, are your inspection tags up to date?"

"I think so," said Randy. "Why?"

"There's a cop tailing us."

Randy looked into his own side mirror. "His lights ain't on. He's probably just drivin' behind us."

"At this speed?" said Tim. "You're driving like an old lady."

"I'm drivin' safe, you ungrateful little prick," said Randy, annoyance just beginning to creep into his voice.

"Sorry," said Tim. He mentally reminded himself that it wasn't him who had cast the Charm Person spell.

"You want I should put the pedal to the metal when there's a cop right behind us?"

"No," said Tim. "All I'm saying is that it's weird for him to not pass us at this speed."

"Maybe he needs to make a right turn soon."

Tim hoped that was the case, but had a strong feeling it wasn't. He'd

been pulled over enough to know the score. If the cop was a major prick, he'd tail you like that for a while before flashing his lights, just to make you sweat.

After another minute passed by, and the cop car didn't, Randy started to look a little nervous as well, constantly looking into his side mirror. They had just passed a strip mall when the blue lights finally flashed on.

"Aw shit," said Randy. He pulled into the driveway of what had once been a house before Hurricane Katrina swept through town. Now it was just a vacant concrete slab. The cop car pulled in behind them. The blue lights stopped flashing.

Tim heard the car door behind them open and shut, but couldn't see anything from his vantage point.

Randy looked into the side mirror again and breathed a sigh of relief. "Ain't nothin' to worry about. That's just Dennis. He's cool. I buy my weed off him."

“I guess that’s good,” said Tim. He still didn’t like where this was going.

“S’up, Dennis!” said Randy.

“Don’t you *S’up, Dennis* me, you stupid sack of shit.”

“What?”

“You trawlin’ for young queers on the internet again, Randy?”

“What? No!” said Randy, his face flushing red. Then he exhaled and smiled. “Oh, you thought… It ain’t like that, Dennis. I was just –”

“The judge ain’t gonna buy that *I thought he was eighteen* bullshit with this one, Randy,” said Dennis. “You’re goin’ away for good this time.”

“*That* boy had an *I.D.*” said Randy. “And this ain’t what it looks like. I swear it ain’t!”

“What is it you see in these kids, Randy?” Dennis spit on the ground. “Do they squeal for you? Do they just come cheaper than fags your own age?”

“I told you, Dennis. I ain’t like that!” Randy was starting to lose his temper, and Dennis was enjoying the hell out of it. If Tim didn’t step in, Dennis would push Randy into doing something he’d regret.

“Seriously officer,” said Tim. “He was just giving me a lift to Bay St. Lou—”

“Shut your cock-socket, boy,” said Dennis. “Ain’t nobody talkin’ to you.”

“Don’t talk to him like that, Dennis,” said Randy. “He’s just a boy.”

“You got a soft spot for your little cyber-queerlet?” said Dennis. “He must be something special.” He walked around the front of the van. “Hop on out of the vehicle, son. Let me get a better look at you.”

Well that didn’t sound creepy at all. But what choice did he have. To

reassure himself, Tim felt for the pommel of his dagger hidden beneath his clothes. He opened the door and hopped down onto the ground.

Dennis pinched Tim's cheek roughly. "You got some fleshy cheeks and a weird nose, but I guess you ain't such a bad little piece of ass."

Tim pulled his face out of the officer's grip. His cap fell off.

"Goddamn, boy!" said Dennis. "What the fuck's wrong with your ears?"

Tim clapped his hands over his ears. "I umm… I was in a lawnmower accident as a child."

Dennis turned to Randy. "Tell you what. You let me take this little fag-freak for a test run, and we can forget all about this."

"Or else what?" said Randy.

Dennis grinned at Randy. "Oh you ain't gonna like option B." His erection had grown visible through his pants. He caught Tim noticing. "You see something you like, son?"

"I thought only criminals carried hypos in their pockets."

"Now what's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you have a tiny dick."

"Why you little shit." Dennis backhanded Tim across the face, knocking him to the ground. "I reckon I'm gonna enjoy this. Randy, you got any rubbers? With a mouth like that, you know this ain't his first time around the block."

"Come on, Dennis," said Randy. "Just let the boy go."

"Never mind," said Dennis. "I got one." He kicked Tim. "Go on. Get up, boy."

Tim stood up. "I'm warning you, you sick fuck. You'd better stay away from me."

"Hop into the back of the van, son" said Dennis. "Randy, not a word out of you or I'll shoot you dead and put a knife in your hand."

"You're a fucking police officer!" cried Tim.

"That's right," said Dennis, pulling a condom out of his back pocket. "And now I'm about to protect and serve." He opened the right side door.

"Sleep, baby, sleep," sang Chaz with a single strum of his lute.

"The fuck?" Dennis dropped to the ground like a bag of potatoes.

"Well," said Chaz. "That's me tapped out of spells for the day."

Tim removed the officer's gun from its holster. "Help me get him into the van."

"What?" said Chaz. "We're kidnapping a fucking cop now? Are you out of your mind?" In spite of his objection, he still grabbed the arm Tim lifted up to him. "You know those cop cars have cameras, right?"

"I think the good officer probably shuts the camera off before he rapes kids," said Tim. "Don't you?"

Dave and Chaz pulled the sleeping officer into the van.

"You hop up front, Chaz," said Tim.

"Why?" asked Chaz. "What if Randy comes out of the spell?"

"Keep this pointed at him." Tim slapped the gun into Chaz's gut. "It's just as good as a spell."

Tim grabbed the rear bumper of the van and lifted himself inside like a gymnast. He and Dave closed the doors. Dave sat back against the wall, but Tim's mind was racing. He could feel his pulse beating in his temples. He scanned the van until he spotted a roll of duct tape. That would do.

As soon as the van's engine started up, Tim got to work taping Dennis's hands together and his mouth shut. He then set to unbuckling the officer's belt.

"Um…" said Dave. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Do you remember that scene in *Fight Club*," said Tim, "when Brad Pitt threatens to cut the police commissioner's balls off?" He unzipped Dennis's pants and pulled them down to his knees, revealing white briefs against whiter skin. "See if you can find a rubber band."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" said Dave. "That dude's a cop. Don't you think we're in deep enough shit as it is?"

"This *dude* just tried to fuck me against my will," said Tim.

"Yeah, I know, but –"

"And do I have to remind you that he thought I was a kid?"

"I'm only thinking about –"

"You're not thinking," said Tim. "You and Chaz are missing the bigger picture here. We're off the grid. If the cops get us on camera, get our fingerprints or whatever, who gives a fuck? We're in deep shit all right. But here's the good part. We're in so deep that we get to act with a sort of impunity. We can't live here like this. There are only two ways this can end. We get Mordred to change us back into our normal selves, in which case we'll never be suspected of the crimes committed by the carnival freaks we currently are. Or we die trying, in which case why not put the fear of God into this kid-fucker before we go?"

Tim pulled the cop's underwear down. The sick fucker still had a semi going. He wiped his sweaty palm on his pants and shivered as he wrapped his hand around Dennis's scrotum. He drew his dagger and placed the blade against the base of the sack. "Wake him up."

"I don't think this is a good idea," said Dave.

"Fine," said Tim. "*I'll* wake him up." He squeezed Dennis's balls together.

Dennis groaned. It sounded more like pleasure than pain, so Tim squeezed harder. The groan became suddenly sharper and louder until Dave finally acquiesced and clapped his palm over Dennis's mouth.

Dennis came wide awake and struggled against his bindings.

“I wouldn’t squirm too much, officer,” said Tim. “I’ve got a knife on your sack.”

Panic and understanding shone in Dennis’s eyes, and he stopped struggling at once.

“My friend’s going to take the tape off your mouth,” said Tim. “Promise not to scream?”

Dennis nodded.

“All right.” Tim nodded at Dave, who then ripped the duct tape from Dennis's mouth.

"Ow!" said Dennis. Some of his mustache hairs had come off with the tape. “You two assholes got no idea how much trouble –”

Tim pressed the dagger more firmly against Dennis’s skin, just short of slicing through. “You’re the one who’s in trouble right now, officer. So shut up and listen.”

Dave looked sympathetically down at Dennis. “I’d hear him out.”

“Now here’s what’s going to happen,” said Tim. “I’m not what you think I am. I’ve got eyes and ears all over town, and I’m going to be watching you. If I *ever* hear of you even *looking* at another –”

Bump. The van ran over a pothole, knocking Tim backward onto his ass.

Dennis screamed.

Tim looked down and discovered he still had a pair of hairy, bloody testicles in his hand. “FUCK!” He flung the sack away to the other side of the van.

“JESUS CHRIST!” shouted Dave. He clapped his hand over Dennis’s mouth. “You cut his fucking balls off!” Dennis writhed around, smearing blood all over the van floor.

“Dude!” cried Tim. “Heal him already!”

“I heal thee!” said Dave.

Dennis stopped squirming and passed back out. New, hairless skin closed the wound, and a small squirt of semen seeped out of his dick.

Tim sat back, groping in his vest’s inner pocket for the pack of cigarettes he’d grabbed from the Chicken Hut. “I guess he still had one left in the chamber.”

Chapter 4

Scott and his crew sat around a lonely table in a dark corner of the Stone Dragon Tavern, the ritziest place their group was still allowed into. While the other three merely sat silently, sulking into their beers, Scott tried to remind himself that all was not lost. They'd had a bad day, but they were still the biggest badasses on the block, at least in this part of town. They could still stir some shit up.

Eric was doing more than sulking. He was still seething as he sat, bare-chested while he had the tavern keeper clean the vomit off of his armor and undershirt. His half-orc skin was gray and smooth, save for the scars he'd earned in the battles they'd fought since they'd come here. When he was in a good mood, he'd point to a certain one and recall the story behind it. The battle they'd just walked away from wasn't a story he'd likely be telling anytime soon. Vomit stains were not scars, and defeat was not fun to recall.

"I'll murder them all," Eric murmured into his beer. "I'll save that half-orc for last. Make him watch while I tear his friends apart with my teeth."

"They're gone," said Scott. "I know the aura of a Teleport spell when I see it."

"Then we'll find them," said Eric. "How soon can you get the Scry spell?"

"It's a fourth level spell," said Scott. "I get my first one next time I level up, but I don't want to waste it on *Scry*. I want Greater Invisibility."

Eric slammed a meaty fist on the table. "Do you want to find those bastards or not?"

Scott sat back in his chair just far enough so that if Eric wanted to punch him, he'd have to stand up first. "It's not a problem. I'm a wizard. I can write both spells in my book. It's just that I get the first one for free. The second one will just be a little expensive."

"You're both wasting your time hunting that half-orc," said Milton, lifting his beer to his bony face with arms thinner than the legs of the chair he sat on. He grinned in spite of his cloak still being damp with half-orc urine. "He's well dead by now. I left that jerk a little surprise. That dagger I shoved in his gut was slathered with giant scorpion venom."

"It's still worth finding them," said Nathan, barely visible in the dark corner. His white teeth gleamed through the shadow of his black hood. "Wouldn't it be fun for me to turn his filthy body into a zombie?"

Nathan, Milton, and Eric looked at Scott.

“That would be badass!” said Scott. “Scry it is, then!” He raised his glass. The others raised theirs and they all clinked together.

It was no easy feat getting Eric in a good mood when he didn’t want to be in one. Nathan’s suggestion of animating that disgusting half-orc’s body seemed to be doing the trick, though. And so of course some jerk had to come nosing around and threatening to ruin the mood.

It was either a tall halfling or a short human who entered the tavern’s common room. Scott would have guessed female, but he couldn’t be sure. It was older than most religions, with wispy white hair sticking up in every direction, like it hadn’t been washed in a decade. It only had one eye, and didn’t even bother to cover the other empty socket with a patch or anything. It wore a simple gown which appeared to be cut from a burlap sack, and it held a rusty tin cup.

“Alms for the poor,” the pitiful creature rasped, clanking around what Scott imagined was supposed to be seed money inside its cup, but sounded more like just a rock.

The other patrons gave the wretched thing a wide berth. Scott supposed it was good that there was someone in the tavern more hated than themselves. And then its one creepy white eye locked on to his. It grinned at him, its four rotted teeth showing through cracked, bleeding lips. It hobbled toward their table.

“Alms for the poor?” the thing repeated.

“We gave at the office,” said Milton. “Beat it.”

The creature rattled the rock inside its cup too close to Eric’s face for comfort. “Alms for the poor?” Eric’s jaw tightened. The vile beggar didn’t know what it was getting itself into.

“All right,” said Scott, not wanting Eric to make a scene. It had been a long day, and he just wanted to drink the rest of it away in peace. He reached into the coin pouch tucked under his robe and pulled out a copper coin. He placed the coin into the cup, where it made a much more convincing clink of metal upon metal. “Don’t spend it all in one place.”

Eric let out a soft snort.

The beggar began coughing violently. It was a wet, phlegmy cough which grew louder and louder until a gob of blood and phlegm flew out of its mouth and stuck to Eric’s arm. It was a swirl of red and yellow, like ketchup and mustard.

Eric stood up, towering over the old beggar. He pointed a massive finger into its face. “You’re pushing your luck, you creepy old faggot. Now get lost, before it –”

“Temper temper, Pestilence,” said Nathan. They called each other by their game names in the presence of locals. Nathan had that kind of creepy presence where he barely needed to speak above a whisper to

interrupt a pissed-off half-orc.

Eric wiped the bloody phlegm off his arm and flung it down at the beggar. “I said it’s time to go.”

The beggar grinned up at Eric and shook its cup. “Alms for the poor?”

Eric drew his sword. “I’m giving you one last chance to scram, you stupid piece of –”

“Pestilence!” said Nathan. It was rare that he raised his voice even to the conversational level he did now.

All eyes in the tavern were fixed on their table. The patrons knew them well enough to keep their distance, as none of them could take the Horsemen in a fight. But if they all joined together... Eric wasn’t the sort to weigh all of the possible ramifications of his actions before just jumping into something stupid. The assault on the Whore’s Head Inn had been his idea, and he was the only one who hadn’t regretted it the next morning when they all sobered up.

Scott was trying to think of something he could say to calm Eric down, but the tavern owner beat him to it.

“Get on yer way now, stranger,” said the unusual-looking dwarf from a raised platform behind the bar. Unlike most dwarves, the owner of the Stone Dragon Tavern shaved the sides of his face, leaving behind only an impressive set of lamb chops, a thick handlebar mustache, and a beard which, while long and braided, was only allowed to grow directly under his mouth. “These folks shared their coin with ye. Now get on outta here before ye get yerself hurt.”

Scott knew the tavern owner had no love for his group. That exit order had been strictly meant to protect this old beggar. But the beggar didn’t even seem to hear him. It just continued grinning up at Eric, jiggling his cup.

“Alms for the –” The beggar sneezed into his hand. When he pulled it away, it was covered in more snot than should have been able to fit inside the thing’s whole hollow head. “Excuse me,” it said, and then wiped its decrepit hand on Eric’s pants.

“Well shit,” said the tavern owner.

“Why you little…” Eric was too enraged to finish his sentence. He thrust his sword into the pitiful creature’s gut.

The beggar let out a small grunt as the sword entered its belly. It gagged, like it was going to hurl, but no vomit came out. Instead, the end of Eric’s sword did, as if it had curved around inside the creature’s body.

Scott stepped to the side and looked behind the beggar. Sure enough, there was no exit wound. It was as though Eric had shoved his sword into a pipe-bending machine.

“What the hell?” said Eric.

The sides of the beggar's chapped lips curled up in a grin, made all the creepier by the big, pointy, metal tongue he was now sporting. Before their eyes, the end of the sword morphed into an actual tongue, the tip melted into a curve, thickening slightly and glistening pink. The tongue did not, however, shrink to an appropriate size. It just hung out of the creature's mouth, wagging and drooling. The beggar closed its one eye and began panting.

"What the – AAUUGH!" said Eric, jerking his hand away from the hilt of his sword. Only it wasn't a sword hilt anymore. It had morphed into the creature's enormous exposed penis. Now that Eric had removed his hand, the creature took up the task with both of its (*his*, Scott now supposed) own hands.

Scott turned away, but morbid curiosity pulled his head forward again. The penis was a sword hilt again, and the horrible creature was pulling it, unbloodied, out of his gut. As he did so, his giant, flapping tongue receded into his mouth and down his throat. When the sword was completely removed, the beggar held it up to Eric, hilt first.

Eric cautiously reached for the sword, but when his hand was close enough, the beggar grabbed it and twisted it behind Eric's back. It was a move that should have been impossible, considering the great discrepancy in their sizes. The old beggar was on Eric's back, wrist in one hand and the topknot of Eric's hair in the other. He slammed Eric's face onto the table.

"Beg for mercy," said the beggar.

"Mercy! Mercy!" cried Eric.

The beggar hopped off Eric's back and landed nimbly on top of the table. "It's like you idiots have never played this game before."

"Excuse me?" said Milton.

The beggar reached a hand down the front of his burlap gown, and then popped something into his empty eye socket. He blinked a few times, and then looked the group over with two fully functioning eyeballs. "Ah, now. That's better."

"What are you?" said Scott.

"Don't you know?" said the beggar. "The more harmless and pathetic a creature appears to be, the more cautious you should be of it. That's just a basic rule of storytelling."

"Wait a minute," said Nathan. "Are you…?"

The beggar raised his arms and grinned with a mouthful of shiny white teeth. "I'm back, boys."

"Mordred!" they all called out together.

"Oh great," grumbled the tavern owner. "They know each other."

Eric wiped away some blood from under his snout. "Where have you been, man? We were worried about you."

Mordred's beggar avatar hopped off the table and pulled up a stool

taken from a table nearby. The other occupants of the table raised no objections. “I ran into a problem with the latest group of gamers I sent in. The bastards nearly killed me.”

“I think we met them,” said Nathan. “Was one of them a half-orc with a really dirty mouth?”

“That’s them,” said Mordred.

“Those jerks puked on me,” said Eric. “And then they threw a dead pig at me!”

Mordred looked perplexed. “I must have missed quite a bit while I was away. Anyway, I’ve got some bad news and I’ve got some good news.”

“What’s the bad news?” asked Nathan.

“That group has managed to find a way to cross between this world and our world.”

“That’s impossible,” said Scott. “I mean, without your say-so, right?”

“I would have thought so,” said Mordred. “But they’re here now, and they’ll be coming after me. That’s the bad news.”

“Then what’s the good news?” asked Scott.

“I’m bringing you boys home!” said Mordred.

“No!” said Eric. “I don’t want to go home. I like it here.”

Scott agreed. Home was full of school and homework and girls who wouldn’t give him the time of day. Here he could do magic and drink beer and pay for sex. “I don’t want to go back either.”

“I haven’t told you the whole story yet,” said Mordred. “The guys who came back, they’re still their characters!”

“What?” said Nathan. Even his blue eyes shone from beneath the shadow of his black hood. “You’re saying they’re still an elf and a half-orc and all that?”

Mordred grinned. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“And they still have their powers?”

Mordred slapped his palms down on the table. “They blew out the back windshield of my car with a Magic Missile!”

Scott chuckled. “Magic Missile. Lame!”

“So what do you say, fellas?” asked Mordred. “You can keep screwing around in this place, or you can come back home and get some revenge on those jerks... and protect me.”

Milton leaned in. “Do you guys realize what we could do back on earth with the powers we have?”

Scott’s imagination raced. “The next time one of those jerks on the basketball team says something to me, Fireball!”

He and Eric looked at one another and smiled. “Greg Hines,” they said in unison. That prick had it coming for sure.

“Heck,” said Scott. “I can just Fireball the whole stupid gym.”

“You two are thinking too small,” said Milton.

“They’ve just started plotting murder and arson,” said Mordred. “That’s thinking too small?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of robbing banks and stuff like that,” said Milton. “Grab the loot and just teleport out of there.”

“Still too small,” said Nathan, once again cloaked in the darkness of the corner. He rested his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers together.

“What’s left?” asked Mordred. “Genocide?”

“Are you in danger right now?” asked Nathan.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean are they currently chasing you at this moment?”

“Nah,” said Mordred. “I gave them the slip, and they have no idea where I am. But I can’t keep hiding forever.”

“You’ll need to hide at least a little while longer,” said Nathan. “Going home now would be foolish.”

“How’s that?” asked Scott.

“Are you so sure we can take that group without any loss to our own?”

“Those little fags?” said Eric. “They’re what? Level two? Three at best? I could take down all four of them single handedly.”

“There’s six, actually,” said Mordred. “The sister, Katherine I think her name was, and her boyfriend, the bard.”

“Big hairy deal,” said Eric. “A bitch and a bard. You’ll have to excuse me while I don’t crap my pants in fear.”

“Let’s not forget the wizard,” said Nathan.

Mordred laughed. “What? That elf guy? He has no idea what he’s doing. And he took a level in Sorcerer. I don’t think you’ve got a lot to fear from him.”

“I’m not talking about him,” said Nathan. “I’m talking about the shopkeeper. What was his name?”

“Goosewaddle,” said Scott, remembering the sign outside the shop.

Mordred’s avatar’s eyes widened. “They’ve got Professor Goosewaddle? Here in Gulfport?”

“They must,” said Milton. “We cleaned out that magic shop. There was nobody in there.”

“But I created him,” said Mordred. “He’s just a character sheet in my backpack.”

“Now you see why we need to level up,” said Nathan. His grin shone through the shadows. “Besides, why go back at level seven when we can go back at level twenty?”

“That’ll take forever,” said Mordred. “I don’t have that kind of time.”

“You’re the Cavern Master,” said Nathan. “How long it takes is

entirely up to you." He stood up. "Gentlemen, I think it's time to retire for the evening." He looked down at the pitiful old beggar. "Break out the Monster Manual, Mordred. Tomorrow we'll be taking a little walk through the woods."

Chapter 5

The ride to Bay St. Louis had gone smoothly since The Incident. The only bump on the road had come at the most inopportune time for Tim to be holding a blade against a man's scrotum. Dave kept his attention focused on Tim, knowing that if he let his eyes wander, they'd eventually be drawn to the discarded hairy nutsack by the door. His heart was racing. What kind of time do you get for cutting a cop's nuts off?

Outside of chain-smoking, Tim didn't show any signs of regretting, or even worrying, about what he had done. He was smoking his fourth cigarette when the van swerved violently to the right, hitting a bump that, if they'd been in the same circumstances as before, might have cost the officer a leg as well as his balls. The van screeched to a halt.

"What the fuck was that?" said Tim, flicking his cigarette in the direction of the officer's severed balls. Dave didn't look to see if he hit them.

"Maybe we're there," said Dave.

"Impossible," said Tim. "Chaz doesn't even know the address of the poison control center."

"Why didn't you tell him?"

Tim opened the van's rear doors. "Because it only just occurred to me."

"Aw shit!" said Randy, looking at the unconscious officer bound in duct tape. "Y'all killed Dennis?"

"No!" said Dave. "Of course not! We just –"

"Jesus Christ!" said Randy, his attention now on the part of Dennis nearest him.

"Holy shit!" said Chaz, coming around from the other side of the van. "What the hell did you –"

"Why are we stopped?" asked Tim.

"The spell wore off."

"Did you pull the gun on him?"

"Yeah," said Chaz. "That's when he really flipped out."

"What was I thinking?" said Randy. "Group of strangers come to my house and ask for a ride, and I'm all like 'Hell yeah! Let's go!'" He punched the side of the van. "I'm in such deep shit."

"Nobody's in deep shit," said Tim. "We just need to think through the situation and choose the most beneficial solution."

Randy ran the fingers of both hands through his greasy hair. "You cut his fucking nuts off, you weird little shit. He's a fucking cop, and he's gonna die in my van!"

"He's perfectly healthy," said Tim.

“HYEEAA!” said Randy, gesturing at the severed scrotum.

Tim shrugged. “Well, except for that. He’s not going to die, but he’s also not going to be diddling any more kids. That’s a good thing.”

“Listen,” said Randy. “I’m sorry about what he done to you. Really I am. And I understand you doin’ what you done. But here’s the thing. All the shit from this is gonna come down on me once he wakes up. You folks can still get out of this. But Dennis knows me. I’m screwed.”

“We still have the option of killing him,” said Tim.

Randy squinted at Tim. “You’re one fucked up little kid, you know that?”

Tim pulled open his shirt, exposing his impressive matt of chest hair.

“Jesus Christmas, boy! What the –” He turned his head to Dave, and then back to Tim, and then to Dave again. “What the hell are you people? What’s up with your arm?”

There was no easy way to satisfactorily answer either of those questions. The silence that followed was broken by muffled Super Mario Brothers music. Tim pulled his cell phone out of his vest pocket.

“Yeah, we’re on our way. How’s Cooper? ... Good. … Yeah, we got a van. … Don’t worry about it. We ran into a couple of complications as well. We’ll sort it out when we get there. By the way, where is that place exactly? … Okay good. Just get Ravenus to circle above it. We’ll be along in a few minutes.” He hung up the phone, placed it back inside his vest pocket, and looked up at Randy. “If you value your balls, you’ll get back behind the wheel, turn right after you pass the Jolly Roger Casino billboard, and drive to the building with the big black bird circling above it.”

Fifteen minutes later, the van stopped again. Dave and Tim opened the doors. Julian waved from around the corner of the building.

“What do we do with him?” asked Dave, looking down at the cop on the floor.

“Leave him here for now,” said Tim. “One crisis at a time. Julian said they had some kind of complication on their end. Let’s go see what he’s talking about.” He hopped out of the van. Dave climbed down behind him.

“That’s somethin’ else,” said Randy, walking around from the side of the van. “How y’all train a bird how to do that?”

Ravenus flapped down to perch on the roof of the building, just above Julian.

“Thanks, Ravenus,” said Julian. “Go and find yourself something to eat. Don’t go far.”

“Very good, sir,” said Ravenus. Dave looked for Randy’s shocked surprise, but only got a raised eyebrow and an approving nod as the bird flew away.

“Now that there’s a smart bird,” said Randy.

“That’s seriously all you’ve got to say about that?” said Julian.

“What?” said Randy. “I said I was impressed, ain’t I?”

“Yeah, but… He…”

Tim laughed. “He doesn’t speak elven, Julian. All he would have heard is a caw.”

Dave, Tim, Chaz, and Randy followed Julian into the Bayside Poison Control Center.

“I should probably tell you,” Dave said to Randy. “You’re going to see some things that may surprise you.”

“Like the bird?”

Dave nodded slowly. “Yeah, like the bird. Or like *that*.”

Cooper and Professor Goosewaddle were sitting on a sofa in the waiting room, flipping through magazines as if it were the most normal thing in the world for a smurf to be sitting next to a half-naked gorilla monster.

Cooper looked up from his Sports Illustrated. “Sup?”

“Jesus Christmas!” said Randy. “What the hell is that?”

“Hey man,” said Cooper, putting down the magazine. “I have feelings, you know.”

Dave sat down on the sofa across from Cooper, picked up an issue of Popular Science, and tried to put his feet on the coffee table. They didn't even come close to reaching. He gestured to Randy at the empty seat next to him, but Randy chose to remain standing, his back against the wall.

“What the hell happened in here?” said Tim, following Julian into another room.

“I told you we had a complication,” said Julian. “This is Stacy. Stacy, Tim.”

“Why hello there!” said a young female voice. “You’re a handsome little guy.”

“Spare me the shit, lady,” said Tim. “I’m having kind of a rough day.”

“You don’t have to be rude,” said Julian.

“Cooper looked like he’s doing okay, so I guess this place had the anti-venom you needed. So why does this room look like two gods duked it out in here? Jesus, who’s blood is that?”

“Everybody out,” said the woman named Stacy. “You said you’d explain everything when the rest of your friends arrived. Now start talking.” Tim and Julian reentered the waiting room, accompanied by a young, curly-haired brunette eating a cup of yogurt. She was someone Dave might have considered pretty before his tastes suddenly shifted to short, stocky, and slightly bearded.

“Okay, it’s like this,” said Julian. “We were playing a game called

Caverns and Creatures."

"My cousin Ronnie plays that game," said Randy. "His momma said it was weird, but she ain't said nothin' bout no –"

The front door burst open, and a very angry-looking Dennis was pointing a gun at them. "Everybody on the floor!" he said. "Hands where I can see them! You're all under arrest!"

"Who the fuck is that?" said Cooper.

Dennis turned his head slightly to the right. "FUUUCK!" He blasted holes into Cooper's torso until the gun clicked empty.

"Cooper!" cried Tim and Julian. Stacy screamed and dropped her yogurt. Cooper's eyes rolled up and his head lulled forward. Dave leapt off the sofa to help him.

"Hey!" said Dennis. "Not so fa—" He froze solid. Only his eyes moved, and they looked freaked the fuck out.

"Go!" said Professor Goosewaddle. "I have the intruder. Help the half-orc."

Dave clambered up and over the coffee table between them and placed a hand on Cooper's knee. "I heal thee!" Blood drooled out of Cooper's mouth.

"Come on, goddammit!" said Dave, slapping Cooper's knee again. "I heal thee!" There must have been some life still left in him, because the bullet holes stopped bleeding and grew just a bit smaller.

"I heal thee!" Dave said a third time.

Cooper moaned as his eyeballs realigned. "Fuck, that hurt."

Dave sighed with relief, but Cooper still wasn't completely healed. "I'm going to give him my last heal, so everybody try not to get shot for the rest of the day, huh?"

"Do it," said Tim.

"I heal thee!" said Dave. A surge of magic flowed through his hand, and Cooper's bullet wounds sealed up entirely.

"Oh god," said Cooper. "That's better. I was –" He doubled over and threw up blood on the glass coffee table. Most of it splattered, but some of it clinked. "Sweet!" he said, looking closely into his own red vomit. He picked out six metal clumps, then flung them at the paralyzed officer. "I think you dropped these, asshole."

"Where the hell did he get another gun?" asked Tim. "Chaz, you've still got the one we took off him before, right?"

"Yeah," said Chaz, lifting his shirt. The gun was tucked into his pants.

"Put that somewhere else before you shoot your dick off."

"Here," said Dave, lifting up the frozen officer's right pant leg. "Ankle holster."

"Why did you tie him up with tape?" said Chaz.

"That's all we had in the van," said Tim.

“He’s a cop. Doesn’t he have a set of handcuffs?”

Tim and Dave looked at each other.

“Shit,” said Tim. “That would have made more sense.”

“Excuse me,” said Julian. “Am I the only one who’s curious as to why you guys saw fit to kidnap a police officer? Did you feel like we didn’t have enough of a challenge?”

“No time to explain,” said Tim. “Someone might've heard those shots. More cops could be here any minute. Cooper, take his other gun away and restrain him. We’ll have to take him with us. Professor Goosewaddle, can you please release him?”

The professor snapped his fingers. Dennis tried to bolt, but Cooper caught him by the arms.

“You freaks’ll set me free if you know what’s good for you,” said Dennis. “You’s all in a shitload of trouble.”

Tim asked Chaz, “What do you think about Randy?”

Chaz shrugged. “He’s cool, I guess.”

“No,” said Tim. “I mean, do you think we can trust him enough to leave him behind?”

"What?" said Dave. “While we steal his van?”

“Good point,” said Tim. “Randy, you’re coming along.”

“Okay.”

“What about Suzie?”

“You mean *Stacy*?” said Stacy.

“Whatever,” said Tim. “Does she stay or come with us?”

“I can’t stay here!” said Stacy. “What am I going to say to police? Oh my god, what am I going to say to my boss?”

“Well I guess that’s that,” said Tim. “Everybody into the back of the van.”

“What about our cars?” said Julian. “If this place is crawling with cops, I don’t want my car anywhere near it.”

“That’s right,” said Stacy. “Neither do I.”

“Uh-uh,” said Tim. “What’s to keep her from just ditching us and going to the cops?”

“To tell them what?” said Julian.

“Are you kidding?” said Stacy. “I don’t intend to miss a minute of whatever the hell is going on here. And besides, if I wanted to go to the cops, I’d just stay here, now wouldn’t I?”

Tim pursed his lips. “You make a good point. But I still don’t trust you. I’m riding shotgun with you. Julian, you drive your car.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Chaz,” said Tim. “You sit up front with Randy. Everyone else in the back of the van. We’ll meet back at the Rouse’s parking lot off Pass Road and ditch the two extra cars. So much for low profile. We’ll look like a goddamn wagon train.”

“Let me just go get my purse,” said Stacy. “Does anyone want a Yoplait? They’re just gonna go bad if nobody eats them.”

Everyone looked at each other.

Tim shrugged. “Yeah, okay.”

“Why not?” said Julian.

“I’m more of a *Dannon* man myself,” said Dennis. “But I – Wait a minute. What did I just say?”

Cooper escorted Dennis outside, making sure he connected with the door frame on the way through. The van doors were wide open. Conspicuously absent was a pair of human testicles.

“Where are they?” cried Dennis.

“Pipe down and get in the van,” said Cooper.

“Don’t you tell me to pipe down, you giant fucking ogre!”

“Half-orc.”

“WHERE THE FUCK ARE MY BALLS?”

Cooper stopped in his tracks. “Is this a trick question?”

“What is he talking about?” said Julian.

“Um…” said Tim. “Remember how I told you we ran into a complication on the way here?”

“It was the cop, right?”

“Well that’s only half the story.” Tim looked at the ground. “I sort of removed his testicles.”

“He cut my goddamn man-sack off!” said Dennis, tears streaming down both sides of his face.

“Please stop crying,” said Cooper.

“It was an accident,” said Tim.

“How do you accidentally cut a guy’s balls off?” asked Julian.

“That’s pretty fucked up, dude,” said Cooper.

“He was trying to rape me!”

“It’s true,” said Dave. “Chaz and I were right there.”

Cooper jerked the cop around to face him. “Did you try to cornhole my friend?”

“Listen, I’m real sorry ‘bout that,” said Dennis, weeping and slobbering. “Really I am. But that’s in the past now, and it still don’t 'splain where my nuts is run off to.”

“Shit,” said Julian. “I think I might have an idea about where they’ve gone, but you’re not going to like it.”

Dave gasped. “Oh no. You don’t mean…”

Julian called out at the sky. “Ravenus!”

“Just in here, sir,” said Ravenus, hopping out from the shade inside the van. “Terribly hot in this world. Is something amiss?”

“What the fuck is that?” said Dennis.

“Ravenus,” said Julian, gesturing to Dennis. “Have you seen this man’s testicles?”

“I don’t think so, sir,” said Ravenus. “Are they very impressive?”

Tim failed to hold back a snort.

“That’s not what I meant,” said Julian. “They’ve been separated from his body. They would have been here in the back of the van.”

Ravenus looked at exactly the spot where the severed scrotum had been when they left it. “Is *that* what that was? I suppose that explains my indigestion.”

Dave, Tim, and Julian winced simultaneously.

“What is it?” cried Dennis, looking up at Cooper. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” said Cooper. “I can’t understand the bird.”

“I’m sorry, officer,” said Julian. “My friend Ravenus here ate your balls.”

Dennis dropped to his knees. “NOOOOOOO!”

“Oh that’s hilarious,” said Cooper.

“I’m not a man!” said Dennis, sobbing on the ground.

“Well you really shouldn’t have left them lying around,” said Julian.

Dennis only sobbed louder.

Stacy stepped out of the Bayside Poison Control Center. She was no longer wearing a lab coat. She looked less like a doctor and more like a girl on spring break. Her curly, brown hair was tied back with a bright orange scrunchie. Round, white-rimmed sunglasses hid eyes that Dave was sure were as bright as her untimely grin.

She held up a bulky, plastic Rouse’s bag. “Who wants yogurt!”

Chapter 6

"So this Mordred guy," said Stacy as she and Tim tailed Julian's car, which was, in turn, tailing a van full of monsters and pedophiles down highway 90. "He sent you into some other world with magic dice? Like, *real* magic?"

"I know it's hard to believe," said Tim. The solar-powered frog figurine on her dashboard bobbed its head back and forth, mocking him with its dead-eyed grin.

"Honey, I just saw a giant scorpion throw a refrigerator across my boss's office. I'm beyond skepticism."

"Well then yeah," said Tim. "Magic dice. And if I'm ever going to get out of this stupid little body, I need to get those dice back. Only, we don't have any idea where Mordred is, or how to find him."

"Is he on Facebook?"

"How the fuck should I –" Tim stopped to think. She might be on to something. He pulled out his phone, flipped it open, and searched for Julian's number. It was a long shot, but this could be a lead worth splitting the party for. "I need to get to a computer right now."

"I've got a tablet on the back seat."

Tim closed his phone. "That'll do." He reclined his seat all the way back, but still had to crawl almost entirely onto the back seat in order to reach the tablet because of his short arms. Tablet in hand, he crawled back up front and pulled the lever to raise the seat back upright.

"Make sure you log me out," said Stacy. "I need to stay off the grid until I figure out what I'm going to tell my boss."

"I think your best bet is to just say you were sick or something, and never made it to work," said Tim, logging into Facebook with his own account. "I don't think there's anything you can say that will adequately explain what he's going to walk in on."

"Is that you?" asked Stacy. Tim had to hold the tablet toward her to avoid the sun's glare.

"Yeah."

"You're cute." She winked at him.

Tim's face flushed. Not so much because an attractive girl called him cute. He was comfortable around women, and he knew he wasn't a bad looking guy. He flushed because, despite photographic evidence to the contrary, she was talking to him like he was eight years old. "It's an old pic—"

"Yow!"

Tim's face slammed into the dashboard. He tasted blood before the pain had time to register. Busted lip. Probably broken nose.

“Sorry,” said Stacy. “Red light.”

Tim sat up. They were right on top of the van’s back bumper. “You broke my fucking nose.” He sounded like Donald Duck. *Yeah, it was definitely broken.*

“You should be wearing a seatbelt.”

“And you should keep your eyes on the goddamn road!” He opened the console between the seats, hoping to find some tissues. All he found in there were old, dry orange peels. They'd do. He plugged his nostrils with bits of orange peel until the bleeding stopped.

Stacy smiled sympathetically at him. Her lips were shut tight, like she was trying to hold in a laugh. He must have been quite a sight from her perspective. A banged up little hobbit honking obscenities at her and shoving orange peels up his nose.

He pulled the seatbelt across and fastened it. The shoulder strap was in his face.

“I’ve got some books you can sit on if you—”

“Just drive the car.” He tucked the shoulder strap under his chin and looked at the tablet. He hadn’t been on Facebook in quite a while. He didn’t derive much pleasure from looking at updates from people he never even liked back in high school and were now succeeding in their professional and personal lives, while he was still stuck in the Chicken Hut and playing Caverns and Creatures with his degenerate friends.

The red circle at the top of the screen said he had seventeen notifications. Maybe he’d been missed after all. No such luck. They were all invitations to play shitty Facebook games.

He touched the ‘Search’ field and typed in Mordred. Best to start broad and narrow the selection as was needed. As it turned out, not a whole lot of narrowing would have to be done. The Mordred search only yielded ten profiles. Some were fat. Some were hairy. Anyone who referred to themselves as ‘Mordred’ was undoubtedly a shithead. But none of the profile pictures showed the particular fat, hairy shithead he was looking for.

Tim sighed. “Dead end.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” said Tim, scanning the freaky profile photos one last time. “It was a good idea. You’d think Facebook would be the perfect place for someone as lonely and lacking in social – Hold on a second…”

“Did you find him?”

“I don’t know. This one guy has his location set as Biloxi, Mississippi, but there’s no way that’s…” He touched the picture to enlarge it. The face in the picture was younger than Mordred’s, and clean shaven, with only the hint of a receding hairline. Closer

inspection of the picture led Tim to notice some finer details in the background. The sofa he was sitting on. The paisley shirt he was wearing. They don't even make shit like that anymore. "That son of a bitch. This picture's got to be at least twenty years old. But that's him all right."

Tim scrolled down Mordred's timeline. Mordred wasn't a very frequent poster, and most of the stuff he did post was just fantasy memes and other bullshit. Nothing Tim could use. He clicked on Mordred's 'likes', and found pretty much what he expected to find. Facebook pages for Caverns and Creatures, Larry Lilacs, Sorcerers on the Shore, and other fantasy-related pages. Nothing of use here either, except… Tim spotted a name he recognized, a local name. Jack's Comics. He clicked on it.

The first thing that caught Tim's eye was Mordred's name as the latest entry in the 'Recent posts by others' field. Tim clicked on the post.

For those seeking adventure beyond your wildest imaginations!

Join me in a quest unlike anything you've ever experienced before. No previous role playing experience required. You can learn as you go. Serious inquiries only, please. Contact me by private message for a place and time.

"That crazy fucker is already at it again!" said Tim.

"What?" said Stacy.

"He's trying to lure more people into his fantasy world. This message wasn't posted more than ten minutes ago."

"Uh oh."

"We've got to get to that shop. I bet that's where we'll find him."

"What makes you think that?"

"He's got to restock his books and dice. He left all his shit at my place when he bolted. Here, watch the van. They'll be turning soon."

Stacy followed the van into the Rouse's parking lot. The supermarket had opened, and there was noticeably more cars and people buzzing about, but Tim's car was still far enough in the back of the lot that they should be able to park the van near it, open the rear doors, and talk without anyone seeing inside.

Tim hopped out of Stacy's car and met Randy and Julian behind the van. "Open the doors," he said. "Not too wide."

Randy opened the doors. "Sweet baby Jesus!"

Even through his orange peel nose plugs, Cooper's stench hit Tim like a rhinoceros farting point blank in his face. His eyes already stung from sleep deprivation. This felt like daggers being shoved into them.

He took a moment to stave off the nausea and looked inside the van. Four faces looked down at him from their yogurt cups.

"What happened to your face?" asked Dave.

"I got hit by a car," said Tim, raising his hand up to Dave. "Can you give me a level zero heal to so I can take these fucking orange peels out of my nose?"

Dave touched Tim's finger. "Heal."

The pain dulled immediately, and Tim blew the bloody wads of orange peel out of his nose and onto the street. "I'm sorry. That was disgust -- Jesus!" He didn't think it could be possible, but the smell from the van was even worse now that his sinuses were clear.

"What's wrong?" asked Dave. He licked the inside of his yogurt cup.

“Ugh,” said Tim. “How can you even eat that in there?”

“It’s the most magnificent thing to ever have graced my palate!” said Professor Goosewaddle. His beard was thick and pink around his mouth. Four empty yogurt cups lay beside him on the floor of the van. “Where might we procure more of this?”

“We’re in the Rouse’s parking lot,” said Dave.

“Uh-uh,” said Tim. “Don’t even think about it. I might have a lead on where we can find Mordred. We can’t afford any distractions.”

“But he’s such a cute little old man,” said Stacy. “Let him have some more yogurt if he wants some. I can run in and get it while you guys work up a plan.”

Tim sighed. “Fine. Go get some fucking yogurt.”

“And Doritos,” said Cooper.

“Sure thing,” said Stacy. She started walking across the parking lot toward the supermarket entrance.

Cooper leaned out of the van and shouted after her. “Wait, no… Funyuns!”

“Cooper!” said Tim. “Get the fuck back in the van!”

Dave pulled Cooper in by the arm. Tim scanned the parking lot. A few old people were looking at him, but nobody was running or screaming, so they had likely dodged that particular bullet.

“You found Mordred?” asked Dave.

“Not exactly,” said Tim. “But I think I know where he’s going to go.”

“Where’s that?”

“Jack’s Comics,” said Tim. “He left all his C&C shit at the Chicken Hut. He’ll need to restock his books.”

“Sounds like a long shot,” said Dave. “How do you know he won’t just order books online?”

“He doesn’t have that kind of time,” said Tim. “He’s already planning to recruit some more players.”

“How do you know?”

“I found him on Facebook.”

“Mordred’s on Facebook?” asked Julian, tapping the screen on his phone.

“Don’t connect with him or message him or anything,” said Tim. “We can’t let him know we’re onto him.”

“So where is this place?” asked Julian. “Jack’s Comics.” He spoke the words slowly as he typed them into his phone.

“Biloxi,” said Tim.

“Yeah, I’ve got it on GPS.”

“We’ve still got almost an hour before it opens,” said Tim. “That should be plenty of time to find a good place to –” He yawned. “— stake it out.”

“Okay,” said Julian. “Well you guys can all follow me.”

“No,” said Tim. “You don’t have a driver’s license.”

“Sure I do.”

“Not one with a picture of a goddamn elf on it. Anyway, it’s best we go in as few cars as possible, so we don’t get separated.”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Julian. “You can track me on your phone.”

“Good idea,” said Tim. “But my phone’s a piece of shit. Stacy’s got a tablet in her car.” Tim opened the passenger door of Stacy’s car, retrieved the tablet, and handed it to Julian. “Set it up.”

After a few minutes of fiddling, Julian showed the tablet to Tim. “You are the blue dot,” he said. “We’re in the same place right now, so that’s all you see. When we go more than about fifty feet away from each other, you’ll see a red dot. That’s me.” He ran across the parking lot. Sure enough, a red dot broke away from the blue dot on the map.

“Where’s Julian going?” asked Stacy, carrying two plastic grocery bags.

“Okay, it works!” shouted Tim. “Come back!” He showed Stacy the tablet. “Just testing out this GPS tracking thing.”

“Neat!” She handed off the bags to Cooper, who passed the bag full of yogurt to a very grateful Professor Goosewaddle.

Julian rode shotgun in the van so that he could navigate for Randy. Chaz reluctantly climbed into the back.

Tim hopped back into Stacy’s car, and they were soon on their way to Biloxi.

Tim’s eyelids were heavy. The last time he’d slept, he was in a different world. “I’m just gonna rest my eyes for a sec…”

Chapter 7

"Okay," said Julian. "Get ready to make a left up here. You should see a Korean restaurant."

"Y'all ain't gonna kill me when this is all done," said Randy. "Is you?"

"I don't think so," said Julian. "We haven't discussed it. Slow down. Okay, there's the Korean restaurant, and there's the comic shop." And there was the Holy Grail. Crappy silver hatchback with a busted rear windshield. "Jackpot."

"Huh?"

"Change of plans," said Julian. "Pull in here."

Randy pulled into the parking lot across the street from the comic book store. Julian checked the side mirror. Stacy was pulling in right behind them. Perfect.

"Nice job, Randy. Wait here." Julian opened the door and stepped out of the van. He walked around to the back and was smacked in the face by a rear door. "Ow!"

"Sorry!" said Dennis, running from the van like a bat out of hell.

"No, it's okay," said Julian. "I should have… Hey, wait!" He looked at Stacy's car. She was shaking Tim. He must have fallen asleep. He looked in the back of the van. Everyone had fallen asleep.

"Shit." Options were popping like soap bubbles as he considered his next move. "Ravenus!"

Ravenus hopped from the dashboard to the window. "Sir?"

"Follow Dennis. Don't let him out of your sight."

Ravenus flew off after the fleeing cop. There was only one thing to do. Only Cooper would be fast enough to catch him.

Julian climbed into the van and shook Cooper's arm. "Wake up!"

"Huh? Wha?" said Cooper, clenching his fist and cocking back his arm. He elbowed Dave in the face. "Oh, it's just you. What's –"

"Cooper!" cried Julian, trying hard to maintain an inside voice. "Dennis is getting away!"

"Who the fuck is Dennis?"

"The cop!"

"Oh," said Cooper. "Shit."

"What are you waiting for?" asked Julian. "Go get him!"

"But I –"

"Hurry!"

Dennis had a two block lead on Cooper when he made a hard right around the side of a post office, but Cooper had a nice gap in traffic and a set of eyes in the sky. He would be on top of Dennis in a matter of seconds. And by some miracle, there was no one around quite close

enough to see him for what he really was.

"What the hell is going on?" asked Tim, groggily.

"Dennis made a break for it," said Julian. "I sent Cooper after him."

Tim was suddenly wide awake. "You did *what*?"

"Also, you were right about Mordred. His car's right there in the parking lot." Julian pointed across the street.

Tim glanced in the direction Cooper and Dennis had run off in, but quickly turned his attention to Mordred's car. "I need to borrow your phone."

"Sure thing," said Julian, handing Tim his phone.

Tim bolted across the street toward the comic shop parking lot. He stealthily made his way from one parked car to another. If Julian hadn't been keeping a close eye on his movements, he probably would have lost him. He paused briefly behind an SUV parked next to Mordred's car, looked this way and that, and then made his move. He tossed Julian's phone through the busted rear windshield. *That was rude.*

Julian turned around. Cooper was running back with a protesting Dennis slung over his shoulder. He wasn't so lucky crossing the street this time. A black Dodge pick-up screeched to a halt not soon enough to avoid him. It's hard to say which would have taken more damage – probably Dennis – but Cooper jumped straight up in the air, coming down hard on the truck's hood.

"Why don't you watch where the fuck you're going?" said the driver as he opened the door. He was a large man with a goatee and mirrored sunglasses. The top of his head was covered with a bald eagle bandana, and a luxurious golden mullet spilled out the back. He wore jean shorts and a black, sleeveless T-shirt. "You dented my truck. I oughtta bust your –" He got a good look at Cooper. "Holy fucking shit!" He scrambled back into his truck, and Cooper continued on his way.

Julian looked for Tim. He was nowhere to be seen. Probably sneaking around parked cars on his way back. Why did he even bother? Must be a rogue thing.

"No, I didn't hit him exactly. He just jumped on the hood of my truck."

Shit. The redneck was on the phone with the police. Far away as he was, Julian's ears were sensitive enough to pick up his end of the conversation. "Cooper!" Julian yelled. "Hurry up!"

"I don't know," the man in the truck continued. "He was at least eight foot tall. Biggest, scariest looking nigger you never set eyes on… Well, I apologize, ma'am. I did not know that… Well how was I supposed to tell that over the phone? You don't sound like one… Look, I said I was sorry… No, bigger than that. In fact, he almost

looked like a gorilla… What? Oh, come on now… I didn't say you *all* look like gorillas. I… But that's not… You can't… Hey, I'm the *victim* here!... Well then fuck you, lady!" He jabbed a sausagy finger into his phone. "Fucking liberals."

Cooper shoved Dennis into the back of the van and climbed in after him. Julian closed the doors and ran around to the driver's window.

"Get out of here," Julian said to Randy. "Drive up the 110 and pull into the Walmart just across the interstate. We'll meet you there."

The van drove off. Tim was still nowhere to be seen. Julian looked for the truck. Thankfully, it was gone.

Julian was about to breathe a small sigh of relief when he spotted the truck again, right in front of him. It pulled up behind Stacy's car, blocking her in. The driver got out.

"Hey Eggroll," said the truck owner.

Julian looked around for anything which might be appropriately addressed as 'Eggroll'. Coming up empty, he looked at the truck driver. "Are you talking to me?"

"You're goddamned right I am, Sashimi."

"I don't understand your ref—"

"You tell that nigger friend of yours that he's gonna pay to have my truck repaired. You got that?"

Stacy got out of the car. "Sir, he had nothing to do with –"

"This don't concern you, bitch." He addressed Julian. "I got that van's plate number."

"Oh yeah?" said Stacy. "What is it?" She was having too much fun for Julian's comfort. This man almost certainly had an extensive gun collection.

"I believe I was talking to Wingding. Why don't you get your skinny, chink-loving cunt back in the car."

"Hey!" said Julian. It was time for an Intimidation check. He stepped forward, getting right in the truck driver's face. He spoke softly, but firmly. "Get in your truck, go back to your trailer, turn on some NASCAR, and fuck your sister."

The man jabbed Julian's chest with his finger. "You've got some nerve, you know that? Coming into this country and talking to me that way. I don't care how many black belts you got. I'll kick your railroad-building, soy sauce-sucking, chopsti—" A giant glob of white ran down from his bandana over his right eye and down his cheek. "What the fuck?" He wiped it out of his eye and flung it away.

Well done, Ravenus. Well done. "You were saying?"

The man was beet-red and shaking, but it's hard to be taken seriously with a face full of bird shit. He got in his truck and slammed the door. The tires squealed as he sped off.

"What was all that about?" asked Tim, who appeared out of

nowhere.

"Do I look Asian?" asked Julian, looking in Stacy's side mirror.

"I wouldn't have thought so," said Stacy. "But I can see it. Your eyes have a little upward slant at the ends."

"Hey, where's the van?" said Tim.

"I sent them to Walmart."

"What the fuck for?" cried Tim. "Did you run out of Funyuns?"

"I had to make a split-second decision. We were drawing too much attention."

"Why Walmart?" asked Tim. "That's miles away."

"It's the first place that came to mind. They could hang out anonymously in the parking lot, and still be easy for us to find."

"Shit."

"We could call them and tell them to turn around if some asshole hadn't chucked my phone into – Hey, where's Mordred's car?" The parking space where Mordred's car had been was now vacant.

"He's on the move!" said Tim. He folded his arms across his chest and looked up smugly at Julian. "But now we can track him back to his house and grab him at night."

"It was still a dick move," said Julian. "You should've asked first."

"Come on," said Tim, hopping into the back seat. "Let's go to Walmart."

Chapter 8

Dave didn't know where the van was headed this time, and he didn't care. The fifteen or twenty minutes of sleep he had gotten on the way to Biloxi had not been nearly enough. The Dennis problem had been temporarily resolved by Cooper promising to eat Dennis's legs if he tried to run again. Dennis agreed to behave, and Dave believed him. But as a precautionary measure, and to make his sleep that much sounder, he handcuffed Dennis's leg to Cooper's wrist and tucked the key safely beside his own balls.

When he got as cozy as was possible against the side of the van, sleep washed over him like a dark tidal wave.

When he awoke in a foggy green pasture, he knew he was dreaming. Nothing about the pasture was unusual. He just knew, because dreams are weird that way. He couldn't see more than a few feet in any direction. He felt compelled to walk forward, so he did.

There was a scent in the air that was neither grass nor fog. Dave sniffed. *Smoke*. The scent grew stronger as Dave continued on his course. *Burning pinewood.* Not long after he identified the smell, he heard the crackle of the fire. It was just ahead of him. He'd see it soon. There were other sounds too. Laughter. Someone was laughing so hard they were scarcely able to breathe. Several people were laughing. What could be so funny? One of the voices suddenly stopped laughing. There was a THUNK and a cry of pain.

Another voice stopped laughing. "Ah, there you are, Dave." The fog evaporated. Dave was standing face to face with one of the Horsemen. The one who called himself 'War'. Beyond him, the other three Horsemen were in a triangular formation around a disfigured troll.

"It *is* Dave, isn't it?" said War. "You're the cleric, right?"

"How do you know my name?"

"Mordred told us about you. He asked me to tell you to leave him alone. And he said to add 'Or else'."

"This isn't real," said Dave. "This is a dream. You're not really here."

"You're partly correct," said War. "This is a dream. But it's also very real. And I hate to nitpick, but it's *you* who isn't really *here*."

"Scott!" shouted the half-orc who called himself 'Pestilence'. "Who are you talking to?"

"Call me *War*," War shouted back to him. "It's the dwarf. I'm in his dream."

"Cool," said Pestilence. "Tell him to take a look at this." He raised a huge maul – the head was a block of steel the size of a small carry-on bag – and ran up to the troll. He took a wide swing and connected

with the troll's face, leaving its lower jaw hanging by a couple of tendons on one side. He danced from side to side in front of the wounded troll, taunting it and waving it toward him, but the troll only watched, white-hot hatred burning in its eyes.

"Why doesn't it fight?" asked Dave.

"Keep watching," said War.

Dave observed the troll more closely as its jaw melded back into place, and the nature of its disfigurement became clear. They had chopped off its right arm at the shoulder and its left leg at the hip, and used the creature's own regenerative powers against it, reattaching each limb where the other was supposed to go. Cooper had thought up the same idea a while back. It was hilarious when they were all drunk, and just imagining it at the gaming table. But to actually see it happening here, it was nauseating.

"You guys are sick assholes."

"Shut up," said War. "You're about to miss the best part."

"Come and get it!" said Pestilence, waving his ass mere feet away from the giant angry monster.

The troll swiped a clawed hand out at Pestilence, who swerved his ass out of the way just in time. Unable to keep its balance, the troll fell down hard on its face. The three Horsemen surrounding it were crippled with laughter.

War laughed a little less heartily and quickly brought it under control. "Mordred wants to know how you came back."

"You can tell Mordred…" Dave wished Cooper was here. Cooper would have the perfect line ready to deliver. "… to sit on it." *Oh my god that was so lame.*

"Sit on what?" asked War. "You mean you want to *sleep* on it? Like, you need a day to think it over?"

Dave felt so old. This kid had never seen *Happy Days*. "Just tell him 'No'. We're not telling him anything."

War smiled. It wasn't pleasant. "He said you might say that. And personally, I hope you keep holding out. I'm looking forward to beating the information out of you myself."

"We might surprise you with what we can do as a team," said Dave. He felt like an after school special, so much lameness was spouting out of his mouth. "We took down a troll too, you know." It had been a forest troll, significantly weaker than a standard troll, but War didn't need to know that.

"We're just having some fun with this one," said War. "He's the last of a family of four. We already threw his older brother and parents into the fire."

"*This* is the baby of the family?" said Dave. "What level are you guys up to?"

“Two levels higher than we were when we woke up this morning,” said War. “We’ve been getting a lot of *random* encounters today.” He used air-quotes when he said ‘*random*’. “Mordred’s kind of paranoid about you guys catching up to him, so he’s toughening us up.”

“Two levels in one day?” said Dave.

“It’s just past noon here,” said War. “No telling how many more levels we can squeeze in before we turn in for the day.”

Dave felt like something was kicking him in the ass. The dream started to fade.

“Dave! Dave!” Cooper’s voice, faint but getting louder. “Dude, wake up!”

“So long, Dave,” said War. “I’m looking forward to meeting you face to face again. Can’t wait to see what kind of *surprises* you have in store for us.” Again with the air-quotes.

“Come on, man! Wake up!”

Dave woke up in the van. Cooper was kicking him in the ass. “All right. I’m awake.”

“The van stopped,” said Cooper. “Give me the keys.”

“What about him?” Dave nodded at Dennis.

“He’s not going anywhere,” said Cooper. “Not while we’re awake.”

“Fair enough.” Dave removed the key from inside his pants and tossed it to Cooper. “Listen, man. I think we might be in some deep shit.”

Cooper feigned amazement. “You don’t fucking say!”

“No, I mean worse than we thought. One of the Horsemen came to me in a dream.”

“I had a threesome with Jessica Alba and Don Rickles in a dream once. Dreams are fucked up. But it’s just a dream.”

“No, Cooper,” said Dave. “He said Mordred wants to know how we came back here.”

“What did you tell him?”

Dave buried his hands in his face. “I told him to sit on it.”

Cooper grinned and stuck up both thumbs. “Heeeeeeeeey!”

Dave wondered if Fonzie’s breath smelled like assholes and Funyuns.”

The van door opened. Dave shielded his eyes from the blast of sunshine. It was easy for him to forget just how dark it was inside this windowless van when his Darkvision allowed him to see perfectly well.

“Everybody okay back here?” asked Randy.

“Make them let me go, Randy,” pleaded Dennis. “I swear I won’t say nothin’.”

“I’m a hostage, same as you,” said Randy. “We best just do as they say until they get what they want.”

Dennis looked at Cooper. “What is it y’all want? You already took my nuts. I got nothin’ more to give.”

“For the record,” said Cooper. “I never wanted those.”

“Where are we?” asked Dave.

“Walmart,” said Randy. “Just off the I-10.”

“Sweet,” said Cooper. “We’re out of snacks.”

“You stay where you are,” said Dave.

“Oh come on, man,” groaned Cooper. “I’m starving. And besides, it’s Walmart. No one will even give me a second glance.”

“That’s not true,” said Dave. “Probably.” He stroked his beard. “I’m hungry too, but we can’t live on Funyuns.”

“I saw an Arby’s not too far from here,” said Chaz.

Cooper licked his big lips. “Arby’s.”

“What is this Ar-bees?” asked Professor Goosewaddle.

“You’ll love it,” said Cooper. He made sad eyes at Randy. “Take us to Arby’s. Pleeeease.”

“Like I was tellin’ Dennis,” said Randy. “I ain’t in charge here. If y’all wanna go to Arby’s, I’ll take you to Arby’s.”

“Tim said to wait here,” said Dave. The dream was still bothering him, and he wanted nothing more than to unburden himself of it to someone who’d understand its significance more than Cooper evidently did. Besides, “If he shows up and we’re gone –”

“Tim can eat my ass,” said Cooper. “He’s bound to be hungry, too.”

“I don’t know if he’s *that* hungry.”

“We won’t be gone more than five minutes. Come on, Dave… roast beef… curly fries…”

“Fine,” said Dave. Maybe the dream wouldn’t bother him as much on a less-empty stomach. “Let’s just make it quick. No special orders. Just two dozen roast beef sandwiches. Agreed?”

“Curly fries?”

“Okay. And a dozen orders of curly fries.”

Cooper’s stomach grumbled like a butter churner full of gravel. “Let’s go!” He farted as he closed the van doors. Dave would never be able to look at a bag of Funyuns again without gagging.

*

Thirty minutes later, the van doors opened once more, allowing Cooper’s fart to roam free and destroy some ozone.

Randy held up two giant Arby’s bags, which Cooper and Dave greedily accepted.

Dave dumped out his bag of individually wrapped sandwiches. Packets of ketchup, Arby’s sauce, and Horsey sauce were plentiful, but Dave didn’t have that kind of time. He barely had the wrapper off before shoving half of the first sandwich into his mouth. No food had

ever tasted so good.

Cooper, whose mouth was much larger, didn't even need to bite his sandwich. He put the whole thing in his mouth, chewed briefly, and washed it down with an entire carton of curly fries.

"Merciful gods!" said Professor Goosewaddle, having taken a more delicate bite of his own sandwich. "Absolutely delectable! I *must* know the spell by which it was conjured up so quickly!"

Stacy's car pulled up to the van, and Tim hopped out like a coiled cobra. "How hard were my instructions? Go to Walmart. Wait in the parking lot. Where the hell have you idiots been?"

Cooper held up his bag of sandwiches. "Arby's," he said spitting out bits of bread, beef, and potato.

"We've been driving around this goddamn parking lot for twenty minutes!"

"There was a line," said Randy. "Sorry."

Tim's face was livid as he looked up at Cooper and Dave. "You guys think this is a fucking picnic? We've got some serious –"

"Cur-ly fries," Cooper sang, waving a carton in Tim's face.

Tim snatched the carton out of Cooper's hand and put a curly fry in his mouth. His eyes rolled up in his head as he chewed and swallowed. "Give me some ketchup."

While everyone ate their fill of roast beef sandwiches, Dave told everyone about the dream he'd had, and Tim explained how he had planted Julian's cell phone in the back of Mordred's car, and that they should be able to track him back to where he lives using Stacy's tablet.

"Nice work," said Dave. "So where is he now?"

"I don't know," said Tim, licking ketchup off of his little fingers. "Stacy's tablet is running low on battery life and she doesn't have a car charger. I turned it off until we all met up."

"Well let's fire that shit back up," said Cooper. "He might be home by now."

"Okay," said Tim. "Just once though. And then we all head back to the Chicken Hut, lay low, and let the tablet charge."

Tim retrieved the tablet from Stacy's car and turned it on. "If Dave's dream means anything – and I'm certainly not ruling that out – then our best bet is to hit Mordred's house tonight, before he has the chance to level up those four shitheads. I'll sneak into his place while everyone's asleep, grab the dice, and – Oh shit."

"What is it?" said Chaz.

"He passed right by us," said Tim, looking up from the tablet to the interstate.

"That's cool," said Dave. "Maybe he lives around here."

"No," said Tim. "He's not going home. He's halfway to Mobile."

"What's he doing?" asked Julian.

“Dave,” said Tim. “The guy in your dream. He told you that Mordred was paranoid about us catching up to him, right?”

“Yeah,” said Dave.

“Well that’s it, then. He’s making a break for it.”

“So what do we do?” asked Chaz.

Tim took another long look at the interstate. “If we don’t catch up to him before Julian’s cell battery dies, we’ll lose him for good.” He turned back to the group. “We’ve got to grab him right now!”

Chapter 9

Julian grabbed what was left of a bag of sandwiches and two cartons of curly fries, and got into the back seat of Stacy's car.

"Stay behind us," Tim told Randy. "Stick to the speed limit and don't lag too far behind." He got into the front seat of Stacy's car and buckled his seat belt. "Okay, let's go."

"Just a second," said Stacy through a mouthful of roast beef sandwich.

"Are you kidding me?" said Tim. "Come on!"

"Listen, you little troll," said Stacy. "I'd like to remind you that you're riding in *my* car and using *my* tablet right after torpedoing *my* job. I don't want to get Arby's sauce all over the car, so I'm going to finish my sandwich before we go." She shoved the last quarter of the sandwich into her mouth and gave Tim the finger.

"I'm sorry," said Tim. He was as humbled as Julian had ever seen him, and he'd seen him piss himself a number of times. "I was rude and I apologize."

Stacy grinned at him, her cheeks still stuffed with sandwich. She started up the car.

They weren't on the road for fifteen minutes when Randy's van veered into the passing lane and pulled up alongside them.

"Are they fucking retarded?" said Tim. "How difficult are the instructions I gave them?"

Chaz stretched his brightly-sleeved arm out of the window, pointing to something on the right of the highway. It was a sign for the upcoming exit, advertising gas stations, restaurants and hotels.

"Jesus Christ," said Tim. "Cooper probably wants them to stop at Taco Bell or something." He leaned forward so that he could see Chaz past Stacy and vigorously shook his head.

Chaz turned to face Randy, and shortly after, the van pulled ahead of them and then in front of them.

"Can you believe this shit?" said Tim.

When the exit came, the van pulled off onto the exit lane.

"What should I do?" asked Stacy.

"Follow them," said Tim. "Whatever this is had better be pretty goddamn important, or Ravenus is going to have a lot more balls to nibble on."

The van pulled into a Texaco.

"They must be low on gas," said Julian. "Can't fault anyone for that."

"I guess not," said Tim. "Stacy, you should probably take off your top."

Stacy looked down at Tim over the frame of her sunglasses. “Excuse me?”

“I mean top off your tank!” cried Tim. His face was redder than it had been when he was shouting at Cooper. “You know… as long as we’re here already.”

“Yeah,” said Stacy. “I’ll get right on it.” She pulled her car up to the pump across from the one the van was parked in front of.

“Sorry, fellers,” said Randy. “I weren’t expectin’ to go on no road trip today.”

“It’s okay,” said Tim. “Let’s just try to hurry it up, huh?”

Stacy’s car was already two thirds full, so her gas was already paid for by the time Randy’s pump shut off.

Randy swiped his credit card. Nothing happened. He swiped it again. A red message lit up. Julian couldn’t read it from where he was, but he had a pretty good idea of what it said.

Randy frowned at Tim. “It says I’ve got to go see the cashier.”

Tim sighed. “Fine. Chaz, you go with him. Make it snappy!”

Julian leaned forward between the two front seats, where Tim was checking Mordred’s progress. “Where is he?”

“Shit,” said Tim. “He’s gone through Mobile. He’s northbound on I-65.”

Five minutes later, Randy and Chaz returned.

“Finally,” said Tim. “Let’s get moving!”

“There was a problem with my card,” Randy said sheepishly.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“It’s a check card,” Randy explained. “I must have drained out most of my account at Arby’s.”

“Un-fucking-believable.”

“You can use my card, sweetie,” said Stacy. She reached her arm across Tim, handing her credit card to Randy. Her right breast was right in Tim’s face. He placed the tablet strategically over his crotch.

Randy humbly accepted the card. “Thank you, ma’am. I’ll pay you back, I swear.”

“We can settle up debts when this is all finished,” said Tim. “Mordred’s getting further away as we speak!”

Randy and Chaz hurried back to the convenience store attached to the gas station.

Tim breathed slow, deliberate breaths, as if to try to calm himself down. “We can still catch up to him,” he said. It was unclear as to whether he was addressing anyone else in the car, or just talking to himself. “He doesn’t have that big a lead on us, and we’ve got a full tank of gas. We just can’t afford any more delays.”

Randy and Chaz approached the car again.

“Um…” said Randy. “There’s just one more little snag.”

“BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!” said Tim. “How fucking hard can this be!”

“The lady at the register said I needed a photo I.D., on account of this card havin’ a different name than the one I showed her before.”

Tim’s little fists were shaking in front of his face.

“I’ll take care of it,” said Stacy. She got out of the car and escorted Randy back to the shop.

Someone, or something, banged on the back doors of the van from the inside.

“What is it now?” said Tim. He got out of the car and walked over to the van. “What?”

“That Arby’s went right through me,” said Cooper. “I gotta take a shit.”

“Absolutely not,” said Tim. “We’re in a public place in broad daylight.”

“Come on, man,” pleaded Cooper. “I’ll put a tarp over my head.”

“And you think that’s going to make you look less conspicuous?”

“Please, Tim!” cried Dave. “You don’t have to ride with him.”

“No fucking way!” shouted Tim. A passing elderly couple looked at him. “What?”

An explosion of flatulence erupted from within the van. Tim lowered his head.

“Merciful gods!” cried Professor Goosewaddle.

“Sweet baby Jesus!” cried Dennis.

“Funyuns!” cried Dave. There followed a loud retching noise, and a splatter of liquid on liquid.

The old couple’s eyes widened, and they hurried into the shop faster than they’d probably moved in three decades.

“Um…” said Cooper. “The situation has been resolved.”

“All set!” said Randy as he, Chaz, and Stacy emerged from the convenience store. He held up a plastic shopping bag. “Stacy even bought y’all some Slim Jims.”

Tim’s eyes widened. He looked at Randy, then at the van, then at Randy again. “No!”

Randy paused, looking bewilderedly at Tim. “What’s wrong?”

Tim jumped up and grabbed the shopping bag out of Randy’s hand. “They’re for me,” he said. “I want all the Slim Jims.”

“That’s a little selfish, don’t you think?”

“Fuck you. Drive the van.”

Randy’s lower lip quivered, but he walked around to the driver’s side and got into the van. “It wouldn’t hurt you none to be a little more polite.” He sniffed the air, and his face squished all together. “Y’all smell somethin’?”

“Let’s go!” said Tim, banging his hand against the car door.

Without a word, Stacy put the car into gear and pulled out of the gas station. She accelerated back onto the interstate. She looked pissed.

Tim held up one of his recently acquired beef jerky snacks. “You want a Slim Jim?”

Stacy ripped the Slim Jim out of Tim’s hand and whacked him over the head with it. “What –” *whack* “the hell –” *whack* “is wrong with you?” *whack whack whack.*

“Ow! I’m sorry! Knock it off!”

“You don’t –” *whack* “treat people –” *whack* “like that!” She chucked the Slim Jim down into Tim’s foot well.

“I’d like a Slim Jim,” said Julian.

Tim tossed the whole bag into the back seat. “Knock yourself out. I hate these things.”

Stacy let out an exasperated sigh and shook her head. “You are a piece of work, my friend. A *piece of work*.”

“I’m sorry,” Tim repeated. “I had to keep him from opening the van doors.”

“And why’s that?”

Julian bit off a large chunk of salty, beefy deliciousness. It had been ages since he’d had one of these.

“You’re probably better off not knowing,” said Tim.

“I’ve got to side with Tim on this one,” said Julian. “Once you know, it’s something you’ll wish you could un-know.”

They continued eastward in relative silence until they hit Mobile. From there, they traveled up I-65. Tim took the risk of letting Stacy drive five miles per hour over the speed limit. Periodically checking Mordred’s progress, he soon discovered that they were slowly but surely closing the gap between them and him. Wherever Mordred was going, he wasn’t in any great hurry.

They hoped Mordred might stop in Montgomery, but the red dot moved right past it. They were about halfway between Montgomery and Birmingham when Tim shrieked, “It stopped!”

“Where?” asked Julian, leaning forward between the seats to see the tablet.

Tim zoomed in on the location. “He’s at a rest area, about fifteen minutes from here. He must have to go to the bathroom.”

Julian’s heart quickened. “If it’s a number two, we might be able catch him!”

Stacy held out an open palm to Tim. He high-fived her. She smiled, and the atmosphere in the car transformed from silent tension to giddy anticipation.

Julian stuck his arm out the window and made a thumbs-up gesture. Randy honked the horn in response. Ten minutes later, both

vehicles pulled into the rest area, and the red dot still hadn't moved.

It wasn't a large rest area. Pretty much just a public toilet and some vending machines. Big rigs and buses were parked on one side of the parking lot, and cars were parked on the other side. At first glance, there didn't appear to be any silver hatchbacks with broken rear windshields.

Tim hopped out of the car. "Where the hell is he?" he asked, frantically scanning the parking lot. He held up the tablet. "The red dot and the blue dot are right on top of each other!"

"He's got to be around here somewhere," said Julian.

Randy opened the van doors. "Jesus Christmas!" he cried as brown liquid flowed down the bumper and splattered down into a puddle on the pavement.

Dennis and Professor Goosewaddle waved their hands toward their noses, as if trying to forcibly shove fresh air inside. Dave just sat there, his face pale and haunted, like he'd given up on life.

"Oh my god," said Stacy, turning away from the van. "You were right. I did *not* want to know *this*."

"Tim," said Julian. "Call my phone."

Tim pulled his phone out of his pocket and flipped it open. "Battery's dead."

"Shit," said Julian. "Stacy, do you have any change?"

"Yeah, why?"

He reached inside the car and took a ballpoint pen out of the cup holder. "Give me your hand." She did so, and he wrote his phone number on it. "Go find a pay phone and call this number."

"Hurry up!" said Tim. She gave him a warning look. "Please?"

Stacy ran toward the main building.

"You ain't gonna hear a cell phone over all this noise," said Dennis.

Dennis had a point. Cars and trucks continuously thundered by on the interstate, while several of the big rigs and buses sat parked with their engines still running. Picking out a measly little cell phone ringtone would be a strain on the greatest of human ears. But maybe not so much for elf ears. Now was not the time for caution. He removed his Papa Joes cap and Katherine's headband to free his long ears.

"Damn, son!" said Dennis. "Ain't they got plastic surgeons in China?"

"I'm not fucking Chinese!" said Julian. "I'm an elf. Now shut the hell up for a second!"

Julian closed his eyes and concentrated on listening. One minute passed. Then another.

"Come on, Stacy," Tim muttered. "Hurry it up."

And there it was. The Star Wars Imperial March. Julian opened his

eyes.

"There!" he shouted, pointing at a Greyhound bus. "He's on the bus!"

"Which bus?" asked Tim.

"The one that's pulling out!"

"It's now or never!" cried Tim. "Cooper! Stop that bus!"

Cooper jumped out of the van and sprinted toward the bus. Everyone else ran after him.

The bus driver slammed on the brakes just short of flattening Cooper.

The ringtone grew stronger as Julian ran nearer, as if Darth Vader himself was about to emerge from the bus.

Cooper roared, and passengers at the front of the bus started screaming. Tim banged his fist on the bus door, but the driver refused to open it.

That didn't matter. The sound wasn't coming from the *inside* of the bus. A wave of panic spread from the front of the bus to the rear. Everyone inside was screaming, which briefly drowned out the phone's ring. Julian slowed his steps, caught it again, and followed the faint sound to the rear of the bus until he was standing in a cloud of exhaust. He coughed and choked on fumes as he felt under the rear bumper. Finally, he found what he was looking for. His phone was duct taped to the bumper. His eyes stung as he ripped his phone free from the tape. Exiting the cloud of bus fumes, he greedily breathed in fresh air.

"Tim!" he called out. "Stop it! Let them go." He waved his phone for Tim to see.

Tim stopped banging on the door. "But where's Mordred?"

"He played us for chumps."

"Cooper!" said Tim. "Knock it off. Let them go."

Cooper, who had been growling and waving his arms about scarily, ceased doing so. He stepped to the side. "Sorry for the delay, folks. Be on your way."

The bus driver didn't hesitate. The bus lurched forward. Passengers crowded against the windows to snap pictures of Cooper with their phones. He gave them the finger.

Julian answered his still ringing phone. "Hey, Stacy?"

"Did you find Mordred?"

Julian sighed. "No."

"Then where was your phone?"

"Come on back outside. I'll show you." He hung up. "Damn it," he said, rubbing the screen with his thumb. "He wrote on it with permanent marker."

"That's just mean," said Cooper.

“What does it say?” asked Dave, who had only just turned up with Professor Goosewaddle.

Julian held up his phone for everyone to see. “Nice try, assholes.”

Chapter 10

Tim reclined his seat and stared at the red light on his phone. *Charging.* With everyone's batteries dying, Stacy had insisted they stop at a Wal-Mart on the way back to buy a car charger. It was a long way back to Gulfport, and both Tim and his phone needed to recharge. Hopefully, a fresh, rested mind would be better equipped to figure out a way to track down Mordred.

"Julian," said Tim. "If I sleep all the way there, do you think you'll be able to show Stacy the way to the Chicken Hut?"

"I know where that is," said Stacy. She didn't sound thrilled about it. "You didn't have enough at Arby's?"

"No, we just –"

"You really need to watch what you eat. Arby's is bad enough, but that Chicken Hut crap is just nasty." She spat her gum out the open window.

Tim raised his seat to its original position. "I wonder," he said, feeling as though he was walking on eggshells, "if there's something more to your feelings for the Chicken Hut than the nutritional value of its food?"

"Fine," said Stacy. "You caught me. My ex-boyfriend cheated on me with the whore that used to work there."

Tim and Julian exchanged a glance. As far back in time as could possibly be relevant, there had only ever been two people who worked at the Chicken Hut, and Tim was pretty confident about ruling himself out as the whore in question.

"Also," said Stacy, "it's just nasty chicken. There's a Popeye's at the next exit." She nodded at the approaching highway sign. "Do you want to stop there?"

"No," said Tim. "We've got to go to the Chicken Hut. My sister's locked in the freezer."

"She's *what*?"

"Do you think we can make it back before sundown?"

"Hang on a minute. How do you know your sister's locked in the freezer of the Chicken Hut? Is it some weird game intuition magic?"

"No," said Tim. "I locked her in there this morning."

"Oh my God! Are you crazy?" said Stacy. The car suddenly picked up speed. "Julian, you need to call 911 right now!"

"Slow down!" said Tim. "She's fine."

Stacy looked at Tim over her sunglasses. "She could be dying in there!"

"Not likely." Tim smiled at her. "She's already dead."

Stacy pulled something out of the compartment on her door and

pointed it under her right arm, which she was still steering with, at Tim. “The next thing you say will determine whether or not you get a face full of mace.”

Tim’s smile was supposed to have conveyed a friendly, I-bet-you-didn’t-see-that-one-coming sort of message. But, in retrospect, he could see how smiling while he confessed to a complete stranger that he had his sister’s dead body locked in a freezer might be taken the wrong way.

“She’s a vampire,” said Tim. “She got turned while we were in the game.”

Stacy shook her head. “Of course she is. Here, have a Mentos.” She tossed the mace canister onto Tim’s lap. It turned out to be a half-eaten roll of Mentos.

Julian breathed a sigh of relief. Tim felt the same. The thought of being sprayed with mace wasn’t half as scary as the idea of the mace cloud blowing into Stacy’s eyes while the car was moving eighty miles per hour.

“We’re going to need something to feed her,” said Tim. “Arby’s won’t cut it.”

“I’ll keep my eyes open for orphanages,” said Stacy. “What’s she doing in the Chicken Hut freezer anyway?”

Tim had hoped against reason that she wouldn’t bring that up. But there it was. He might as well get it over with while there was plenty of driving left to be done. “We own it.”

“The freezer?” Apparently Stacy was also hoping against reason.

“The Chicken Hut.”

Stacy gripped the steering wheel tighter with both hands. “*Do* you?” she said accusingly. “And just how long have you owned it?”

“Look,” said Tim. “I don’t know what happened between your boyfriend and my sister, and I really don’t want to know. But what’s important right now is that she’s a hungry vampire, and she needs to feed. She’ll only be able to hold back her bloodlust for so long before she snaps and hurts someone.”

Stacy steered with her knee while she cracked her knuckles. “I’ve got something to feed her.”

“She’s really strong now,” said Tim. “She’d tear you in half.”

“Tim,” said Julian. “That’s perhaps not the most diplo—”

“We were practically engaged!” said Stacy. “And then one Halloween he goes and makes out with some floozy in a cat costume at Bar Bones!”

Tim had hoped that it might all be a big misunderstanding, but his hopes just evaporated. Bar Bones was Katherine’s favorite hangout. Also, he remembered that Halloween. It was two years ago. She had left him manning the store all by himself so she could go to that

Halloween party. He remembered the cat costume. *But Stacy didn't know that he remembered any of that.*

"How do you know it was her?"

"My boyfriend's dumbass friend posted pictures of it all over Facebook," said Stacy. "It didn't take too many clicks on friends of friends of friends to track her down."

Well, shit. "She couldn't have known he was engaged. If you think about it, she did you a favor. He was going to cheat on you sooner or later."

"Julian, honey," said Stacy. "Can you pass me a Slim Jim?"

"Uh… sure," said Julian. "Do you want me to unwrap it for you?"

"Nah, that's all right, sweetie. Just pass it here."

Julian passed her the beef stick, and she slapped Tim over the head with it.

"Ow!" said Tim, more from surprise than pain. After you have your foot gnawed nearly off by a giant rat, you can more easily withstand being slapped by a sausage.

"Does asshole run in your family?"

"I'm sorry," said Tim. "I was just trying to –"

"Ahem," said Julian. "If I may?"

"Fine," said Tim.

"Stacy," said Julian. "There's no point in dwelling on past misfortune. You're a beautiful young woman who deserves much better than some loser who would cheat on you with Tim's sister."

"Hey," said Tim. But he could see Julian's Diplomacy skill in action. He was complimenting Stacy while insulting Katherine at the same time. It was just what she wanted to hear. Brilliant.

"Why ain't you a sweet thing!," said Stacy. "Go on."

"And I'm sure that when this is all over, and we're back to our normal selves, that if you'd like to beat the shit out of Katherine, then Tim won't stand in your way."

"That sounds fair," said Stacy. She looked at Tim. "Get me a cigarette out of the glove box." She pushed in the car's cigarette lighter button.

"I didn't know you smoked," said Tim, eager to fill his own lungs with tar and nicotine. He'd finished off his own pack in the back of Randy's van.

"It's just when I'm upset."

Tim opened the glove box and found a nearly full pack of Virginia Slims. Not his brand, but he wasn't picky. He passed her a cigarette. "Is it okay if I –"

"No!" she said, snatching the cigarette out of his hand. She lit it, placed the plug back into its socket, and took a nice, long drag. Tim watched longingly until she started hacking like she was about to barf

up a lung. She threw the barely spent cigarette out of the window. “I haven’t been upset for a while.”

Tim reclined his seat once more, sat back, and watched the sun sink lower in the sky as his exhaustion overtook him. They weren’t going to make it back before sundown. Katherine was going to be pissed.

Chapter 11

Katherine's eyes snapped open, and she knew the night had begun. She'd been hungry when she lay down to sleep on the freezer floor, but now her insides ached like they never had before. She needed blood. She needed it now.

"Master," said Ginfizzle, sitting up. "I starve."

"I know, Ginny," said Katherine. "I'm hungry, too. Let's see what the boys brought for us." She stood up and knocked on the inside of the freezer door. Nobody answered. She knocked harder. Still no response. She put her ear to the door. Ginfizzle did likewise. The metal was ice cold against her skin, but not uncomfortable.

"Do you hear anything?" asked Katherine.

"Nothing, master."

Katherine couldn't hear anything either. That could have been due to the thickness of the door, but she suspected it was probably due to her brother and his fucktard friends forgetting about her.

"Stand back," said Katherine, taking off her shoes. She raised her arms and kicked her heel into the door as hard as she could. Cold steel gave way to her dead foot. The locking mechanism crunched as the freezer door swung open. She walked into the kitchen through a cloud as frosty air met humid warmth. "Wait here."

Katherine briefly admired the dent her foot had left in the steel door. As much of a badass bitch as she felt, she remained cautious. She peeked around the door and between kitchen equipment into the dining area. The lights were turned off, and the twilit sky provided little light through the gaps in the blinds over the front windows, but she could see with near perfect clarity that the place was empty.

Walking silently past the office, she caught something amiss in the corner of her eye. Or rather, it was the lack of something. In the cracked office mirror, she saw only the fractured reflection of the little black dress she'd asked Millard to have made for her. That wasn't so odd, as it was the dress she was currently wearing. The odd part was that it appeared to be empty and hovering. She couldn't see any of herself in the reflection. She went into the office to get a closer look at one of the larger pieces of mirror. Her eyes had not deceived her.

"Holy shit," she said to herself. "I'm invisible!" She pulled the dress off over her head and looked in the mirror again. It was incredible. There was absolutely nothing of her there. She closed her eyes as her stomach churned. She would feed soon. Being invisible meant that she could hunt with impunity.

"Master!" Ginfizzle croaked from inside the freezer. "I'm hungry."

"It's safe to come out," said Katherine. "Take off your clothes."

“Well I… As you wish, master.”

The blue light on the CPU meant that Tim had left the computer on. She wiggled the mouse, and the screen lit up. The first thing she saw was the Gulfport sex offender registry.

“What the fuck?” she murmured to herself. Was Tim out there kidnapping a pedophile to feed her? She supposed there was some logic to it. Who’d miss a pedophile? It was a sweet gesture on Tim’s part, but they’d inevitably screw this up. Being super strong and invisible, she was much better suited to go hunt down pedos on her own. She made a mental note of the area with the highest concentration of registered sex offenders. She only hoped she and Ginny could get there before Tim got hurt.

“I’m sorry,” said Ginfizzle. He was behind her, standing in the office doorway. “My dingle isn’t working.”

“Your what?” Katherine turned around. Ginfizzle was standing in the doorway, frowning down at his limp little vienna sausage dick. “WHAT THE FUCK!”

“I’m sorry, master,” said Ginfizzle. “This has never hap—” He looked up. His mouth hung open as he gaped, transfixed by Katherine’s breasts.

Katherine gasped and snatched her dress from off the desk, trying to cover as much as she could. “Get the hell out of here, you little creep!”

Ginfizzle backed up into the kitchen. “But you said –” He turned his head. Something to his right had managed to tear his gaze away from Katherine’s body. The something growled.

“Butterbean!” said Katherine.

Ginfizzle licked his lips. “Blood.”

Butterbean barked, and Ginfizzle disappeared from the doorway.

Katherine dropped her dress and ran out after him. When she arrived in the dining area, Ginfizzle was on top of a struggling Butterbean, his fangs already sucking out her wolf’s lifeblood through its neck.

“Get off of him!” she screamed, grabbing Ginfizzle by the back of the neck. She pulled him off Butterbean and lifted him up in the air.

“Mine!” cried Ginfizzle. He squirmed in Katherine’s grasp and kicked her in the face. It was harder than she’d ever been hit in her life. Had it not been for her own superpowers, it might have knocked her head clean off. Still, the crunch she heard and felt inside her head suggested that he had broken her nose.

“Get out of here, you little troll!” Katherine hurled the naked, undead halfling headfirst through the front window, destroying the blinds. The right side of the headrail collapsed, sweeping the blinds to the left. The entire window pane had turned white, webbed with tiny

fractures, but the window held together except for the foot-and-a-half diameter hole Ginfizzle had flown through.

Ginfizzle stood up in the parking lot outside, a little naked guy smeared in blood. He pointed back at Katherine "MINE!"

"You stay away from here!"

Ginfizzle shook with impotent rage, which Katherine understood. She felt bad for him, but she couldn't allow him to be near Butterbean. Then his body suddenly became covered with coarse, brown hair. This, she didn't understand quite so much. His head and arms shrank while his fingers grew crazy long, a membranous web forming between them. It wasn't until just before the transformation was complete that Katherine had any clue as to what was going on. The big bat in the parking lot launched itself up into the evening sky, flapping awkwardly as it came to terms with being a bat for the first time. Katherine watched Ginfizzle fly away and thought that she, too, would have to try out this bat thing sooner than later. A whimper broke her train of though. She turned around.

Butterbean lay helpless on the floor. His eyes were open, and he was still breathing. A small pool of shiny red blood expanded slowly on the floor below the two dripping puncture wounds on his neck.

Katherine's naked body shook with hunger. She clenched her fists, her long fingernails digging into her palms. She shut her eyes tight.

Out of sight, out of mind.

No good. She could still smell it, salty and nourishing. She wouldn't be able to stay here much longer without finishing the job that Ginfizzle had started.

Mustering all of her will, she forced herself back into the office. "There's plenty of blood to be had outside," she told herself. "I'll chase down squirrels and stray dogs until Tim gets back with a nice, fat, juicy pedophile." She knew she might be deluding herself, but it cleared her head long enough for her to slip her dress back on. Her purse was there, so she grabbed that too. She needed to put as much distance as possible between herself and Butterbean. Not wanting to risk another glance at him, she hurried out the back exit of the restaurant.

She felt a little relief when she closed the door behind her. There was a barrier between herself and Butterbean. She knew it was little more than a psychological barrier. Hell, she could probably punch holes through the concrete walls of the restaurant if she wanted to.

She scanned the sky for Ginfizzle. As long as she had no idea where to go, it would probably be a good idea to keep an eye on him. But he was long gone. She needed her brother's help. He and his friends knew this game. And she needed Dave to hurry back and heal Butterbean. Since she couldn't wait around here, she'd go find them. The

pedophile dots on that map were just a few miles away. Now all she needed to do was figure out how to turn into a bat.

Even as she thought it, the transformation started. She briefly witnessed her fingers growing longer before her vision blacked out. Some kind of transformation was taking place in her eyeballs as well. The whole process was over in a few seconds. The next thing she knew, she was flapping her leathery, misshapen arms against the pavement.

After a few more flaps, she got into a rhythm. She could feel the membranes of her wings catch air the way they were supposed to. And before she knew it, she was flapping like a madman and hovering a couple of feet off the ground.

"Hell yeah!" she tried to say, but it just came out as a high-pitched squeal. To her surprise, the sound of her own bat voice formed an image in her mind of her immediate surroundings. It wasn't exactly a vision, because it was separate to what her eyes were seeing. The best way she could describe it was an overlay of a colorless, textureless clay model of her surroundings, flashing over what she actually saw with her eyes.

She shrieked again, and the image flashed inside her tiny bat head again. It lined up perfectly with her actual vision, which she was surprised to discover was just fine. She had always thought bats were nearly blind. She'd remember this the next time someone used the phrase 'blind as a bat'. And then she'd tear their throat out.

No! No! No!

Enough dilly-dally. Katherine needed to find the guys before she hurt someone. Julian would be able to summon her a nice fat horse. That should hold her over until they figured things out.

She flapped her wings harder, pushing more and more air beneath her, until she could see everything within miles of her. It occurred to her that she ought to be terrified, being so high up off the ground, but she wasn't. Were it not for the growing hunger pains gnawing away at her insides, she might have deemed the experience refreshing.

Katherine climbed slowly, but steadily, in altitude while she flew in the general direction of the pedophile neighborhood where she expected to find Tim and his friends. She hadn't memorized the map on the computer, but if she could find the Rouse's nearby, she was pretty sure she'd be able to pinpoint the particular street she was looking for.

Rouse's didn't take long to find. It was the largest building, with the largest parking lot, for miles around. Flying was so much more convenient than driving. She spread her wings wide and held them still, which sent her plummeting toward the hard, unforgiving earth below. She flapped wildly until she was able to stabilize herself in the

air. Lesson learned. She wasn't much of a glider.

Flying over the Rouse's parking lot toward Pass Road, Katherine spotted something strangely familiar. In the very back of the lot, segregated from all of the other cars, sat two cars, side by side, like nerds at a car party. One of them looked conspicuously like Tim's.

It probably wasn't Tim's car. There might be a thousand faded blue 90's era Honda Civics… with a broken passenger-side mirror… and a "*Don't make me get out and roll initiative!"* bumper sticker.

Holy shit. That was Tim's car!

The car next to it was probably Dave's. Katherine couldn't remember exactly what he drove, but it looked familiar enough. Those dorks must have blown the pedophile mission, and now they were at Rouse's trying to talk the butcher into giving them some stale cow blood or something. That might do in a pinch, but she craved warm, living blood, pumped fresh from a beating heart.

She decided to wait for the boys to come out. If they managed to score any blood at all, she needed it. In the meantime, she'd fly around to the back of the store and see if there was a raccoon in the dumpster or something.

When she got to the back of the store, she changed back into her normal form. That is to say as normal as one could call her half-elf form. When the transformation was complete, she was pleased to find that she was still wearing her dress. She was worried she might morph back naked, but it appeared that the dress and purse were absorbed into her bat form. She wished she had thought to wear shoes.

Katherine lifted the lid on the dumpster behind the building, releasing a cloud of flies and the putrescence of rancid meat, fish, and spoiled fruit sun baked in a closed metal box. No raccoons or stray cats or possums or anything. But what she did see was a nice big rat scurrying away from her.

"Come here, rat," said Katherine. She didn't know why she said it, or why she didn't feel stupid for saying it immediately after the words escaped her lips.

The rat stopped and turned around. Somewhere deep inside her mind, Katherine had expected it would do just that.

Katherine squatted down and smiled. "Come here, little guy." She reached her hand out. The rat moved slowly toward her. "That's it. Don't be afraid."

She placed her open hand palm-up on the pavement. The rat sniffed it briefly before stepping on.

"That's a good boy," said Katherine. She snapped her hand shut around the squirming rat's body, grabbed its head with her other hand and bit savagely into its side. She spit out the chunk of hairy flesh she had bitten off and sucked in the hot, fatty rat blood which oozed out

of the wound. It was delicious.

All too soon the rat had no more blood to give, despite her best effort to squeeze it from both sides. When she finally decided to give up, she bit the rat's head off and spit it on the ground, just in case. She had already accidentally turned a midget. She didn't want to take any chances on setting a swarm of vampiric rats loose on an unsuspecting Gulfport.

When she tossed the decapitated rat corpse on the ground, she nearly hit a second rat. It was sitting on its hind legs staring up at her. Another rat came to join it, followed by two more. They were coming from around both sides of the building, and from the dumpster of the neighboring building.

It appeared that every rat in the area had answered her call and were now lining up to have their blood sucked out. She would think more on this later. Now was the time to eat. One by one, the rats jumped into her open palm, and Katherine sucked them dry, taking care to remove each of their heads when she was done. Eventually, she streamlined the process a bit, biting off the head first and sucking the blood straight out of the neck. She tossed away headless rat corpses like empty bottles of Bud, until she had a nice little pile.

Katherine had sucked the life out of maybe three dozen rats by the time she'd had enough. There were twice that number still alive, squeaking their bids to be the next one in line.

"No more today, guys," said Katherine. "I couldn't possibly." She felt bloated and lethargic, like it was Thanksgiving… and maybe a little drunk. She sat down on an overturned milk crate to clear her head. "Take off, guys," she said to the congregation of rats. "Maybe we'll do this again tomorrow. The rats dispersed, going back about their rat business.

The back door of the building opened. Katherine's view was obscured by the dumpster. What should she do? Should she turn into a bat and fly away? Should she turn into a wolf (something she only just instinctively realized was an option) and run? Should she try to play it cool? Should she – "God*damn*!" said a large, bald, black man, stepping out into view from the other side of the dumpster. He was smoking a cigarette and staring down at all the rat remains. By the way his muscles filled out his uniform shirt and khaki pants, Katherine guessed he worked in the stock room.

"Hi," said Katherine.

The man looked up from the rats. The cigarette fell out of his mouth. "Miss, are you okay? What happened to you?" He pulled a cell phone out of his pocket. "Just stay calm, ma'am. I'll call you an ambulance."

"Huh?" said Katherine. "Wait, no!"

The man stopped pressing the screen on his phone and looked at her.

"I'm sorry," said Katherine. "I must look like shit." She pulled a compact mirror out of her purse and looked in it. There was nothing to see but the wall behind her. She smiled and rolled her eyes. "Oh right. No reflection. Duh! Is there blood on my face?"

The man nodded silently, his mouth ajar.

Katherine felt she wasn't making a good first impression. She shouldn't have said 'Duh'.

"Let's start over. My name's Katherine."

The man just furrowed his brow at her.

"And you are…?"

"Tyrell."

"Nice to meet you, Tyrell. So tell me about yourself. Are you into basketball? Do you have a girlfriend? Is race an issue for you?" Oh my God. Did that sound racist and desperate at the same time?

"Ma'am, what the hell is going on here?"

"I was just making small talk," Katherine said defensively.

"I mean with all the dead rats!" said Tyrell. "I was just out here an hour ago, and I don't remember seeing any rats or crazy white women."

Before she knew what she was doing, Katherine was up on her feet and holding Tyrell a foot off the ground by the neck with one hand. "You will respect me!" If a lion's roar could form articulate words, that's what her voice sounded like.

Tyrell's eyes were wide with terror as he tried to suck in air.

Katherine set him down. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know what came over me. I think I ate too much. Please forget I did that."

Tyrell got down on one knee and lowered his head. "It is forgotten, master."

"Hey, whoa!" said Katherine. "No, no, no! None of that. In-uh-propriate. Come on, man, stand up!"

Tyrell stood up. "As you command."

The back door swung open again.

"Come on, Tyrell, said an older, higher-pitched voice than Tyrell's. "The party's over. I need you and Anthony to help unload the – What the fuck?" He was a middle-aged, chubby white guy, filling out his Rouse's uniform in a completely different manner than Tyrell.

Tyrell punched his manager in the face.

Katherine gasped. "Tyrell! No!"

It was a quick jab, clearly intended as a warning. His arms were big enough to knock this guy's head off if he'd wanted to. But this punch merely landed the surprised manager on his ass.

Tyrell pointed a finger at his boss. "You mind your tongue in the

presence of the master."

The manager scrambled backwards on his hands and feet. "You're fired! You two crazy sons of bitches get the hell out of here before I call the police!"

Tyrell took a step toward him.

"No!" said Katherine. "Stop!"

Tyrell stopped and turned toward her.

The manager ran inside, slamming the door behind him.

"I'm so sorry, Tyrell," said Katherine. "I didn't mean to make you lose your job."

"I live only to serve you."

"Jesus! You've got to stop saying stuff like that. Come on. We've got to get out of here in case he really does call the police. Do you have a car?."

"I have a truck," said Tyrell. "But I fear it is too humble a vehicle to transport someone of your grace and radiance."

Katherine turned away. If she had any circulation, she was sure she would have been blushing. "You think I'm pretty?"

"Your beauty transcends my ability to express it in words."

Katherine waved her hand dismissively at him. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. You had me at 'I have a truck'. Let's get out of here."

Chapter 12

Dave stared into the pink eyes of the lone male of their ten doomed captives riding along with them in the back of the van. “Sorry, buddy,” he said. “At least it will be fun while it lasts.

The rabbits had been his idea. They were easy to buy, cheap to feed, and had an incredibly high rate of reproduction. It might not do much good for the short term, but when those little rodents started multiplying, Katherine and her little halfling friend would have more fresh blood than they knew what to do with.

When the van finally stopped, Dave couldn’t wait to get out. Between the smell, Cooper’s continuous commentary on the rabbit fucking that was taking place in the cage between them, paint cans rolling around and clanging against his armor, Goosewaddle prying open the lids and tasting different colors, and Dennis’s incessant crying, the ride had been nothing short of torture.

Randy opened the van’s rear doors, and Dave jumped out, sucking in as much fresh air as he could.

“Never again,” said Dave. “Next time we have to go somewhere, I’ll ride in a trunk. Somebody else can ride with Cooper.

“Fuck you, dude,” said Cooper. “You’re not exactly a bundle of laughs to ride with either.”

“How are the rabbits?” said Stacy. Naturally, she’d been the one who had to pay for them.

“They’re fine,” said Dave.

“You got yourself a bargain, lady,” said Cooper, hauling the cage out of the van. “This little bastard is the Ron Jeremy of rabbits.”

“What the hell happened to my window?” shouted Tim when Julian managed to rouse him from his sleep. He hopped out of the car and looked up at the shattered pane of glass.

“Looks like someone broke in,” said Julian.

“By jumping through the window?”

“Of course not,” said Julian. “You break a hole in the glass and reach around to unlock the door from the inside.” He put arm through the hole and reached the handle to demonstrate.

Tim pushed on the door. “No, the door’s locked.”

“Well maybe they locked it on their way out.”

“What for?”

Julian shrugged. “Courtesy?”

“Uh-uh,” said Tim. “That hole is way too big. Hell, I could fit through that hole with room to spare. Also look, the broken glass is out here rather than inside. Whatever went through this window broke *out*, not in.”

Cooper gave Tim a slow clap. “Well done, Columbo.”

Tim looked up at Julian. “Open the door. We need to check on Katherine.”

As soon as Julian got the door open, Tim gasped. “Oh my God. They ate Butterball.”

Dave was one of the last ones inside, and so short that he couldn’t see anything until the crowd spread out a bit.

“Oh that poor thing!” said Stacy.

“Why is there a wolf in here?” asked Randy.

Dave pushed his way in to where Tim was kneeling over Butterbean’s bleeding body. “Is he…?”

“His heart’s still beating,” said Tim. “But he’s in pretty bad shape. Dave, how are you on heals?”

Dave shook his head. “I’m out until dawn.”

“Does anyone here have the Heal skill?”

“I took a first aid course as part of my police training,” said Dennis.

“Good enough,” said Tim. “See what you can do with him.” He punched the wall. “Goddammit! I can’t believe Katherine would do this.”

“We don’t know what happened here,” said Dave. “But if two vampires went to town on one wolf, there’s no way he would have survived.”

“How the hell did she even get out of the freezer anyway?” asked Tim, stomping back into the kitchen. “Katherine!”

Cooper put the rabbit cage on one of the dining tables. “Come on, Ronnie! Give it to her!”

“She’s gone,” said Tim. “Looks like they kicked open the freezer door, attacked Butter, and took off out the back. The back door’s unlocked.”

“So then what happened to the window?” asked Julian.

“Who the fuck knows?” said Tim. “I’ve got to find her before she hurts somebody. If she was willing to attack her own Animal Companion, there’s no telling what she’ll do to people she doesn’t give a shit about.”

“You can’t go out there,” said Dave. “It’s pointless. She could be anywhere.”

“Then what do you suggest I do, Dave? Sit on my hands while my sister is out there killing people?”

“You could make some chicken,” said Julian. “I’ll send Ravenus around to scout for Katherine.”

“Chicken sounds good,” said Randy. “I ain’t had nothin’ to eat since Arby’s.”

“I done all I could with your wolf,” said Dennis. “The wounds are shallow. I reckon he’ll be all right once he replenishes his blood

supply. Is there a bathroom in here? I gotta wee."

"Um…" said Cooper. "Yes and no."

"Just go out back and find a tree," said Tim.

"Public urination is against the law," said Dennis.

"So is rape," said Tim. "Fuck off."

"Will I ever live that down?"

"Cooper, you go with him. Don't let anybody see you."

"Ravenus," said Julian. "Fly around outside and see if you can find Katherine. Do you remember what she looks like?"

"Of course, sir."

"Not good enough," said Tim. "You need to fly in a tight spiral formation," he had switched to a British accent so the bird could understand him. Dave knew he was serious because he didn't make a fuss about it or go overboard with it. Just a straight-up, if not necessarily good, Michael Caine impersonation. "Expand slowly enough to make sure you see everything you can. She's not likely gone too far. If you see people running or screaming or anything, come back and –"

"Turn on the Bat Signal?" said Katherine, standing in the doorway with some huge black guy.

"Found her!" said Ravenus.

Stacy crossed her arms. "That's her alright." Her tone wasn't quite so plucky as Dave was used to.

"Katherine!" shouted Tim. "Where the fuck have you been?"

The big black guy stepped past Katherine and took a knee in front of Tim. "That's no way to speak to a lady, young man."

"I'm thirty years old, Beef Bone."

The man nodded. "In that case…" He punched Tim in the face. It wasn't a hard punch, but it was fast and unexpected enough to land Tim on his ass.

"Stand down, Tyrell," said Katherine. "That's my brother."

The big man bowed before her. "Please accept my humblest apologies, master."

"Master?" said Dave.

"Oh Katherine," said Tim. "What did you do?"

"Nothing!" said Katherine.

"Your first day back as a vampire, and you pull a Paula Deen?"

"It wasn't like that. He caught me outside of Rouse's eating rats, and I was nervous, and he called me a crazy white woman –"

"Can you blame him?" asked Cooper, escorting Dennis back into the dining area. "You look bugfuck insane."

Cooper had a point. Katherine's blond hair was all over the place. Her dress was dirty. The lower half of her face, all the way down her neck, was covered in what Dave could only assume was dried rat

blood.

"I lost control of my impulses," said Katherine. "The next thing I knew I was all up in his face demanding that he respect me."

"You dominated him," said Julian. He was sitting in a chair with the Caverns and Creatures Monster Manual opened on his lap.

Tim glared at him. "This isn't something to congratulate her for."

"I'm not congratulating her," said Julian. "That's what it's called. It's right here in the rules. Vampires can impose their will on people."

"Sweet," said Cooper. "Have you made him… you know…" He nodded down at the rabbit cage, where little fuzzy Ron Jeremy was boinking away at one of his concubines.

"Ew! No!"

"Racist."

"It says here that you can release the subject anytime you like," said Julian.

"Go on, Katherine," said Tim. "Let him go."

"I don't know how," said Katherine.

"Ain't that the truth," said Stacy.

Katherine put her hands on her hips and looked at Stacy. "I'm sorry. Who the fuck are you again?"

"Katherine!" said Tim. "Just say the words."

"What words?"

"I find it doesn't matter so much," said Dave. "As long as your intentions are clear. When I want to heal someone, I say 'I heal thee', but I don't think it would work the same if I said something like 'Wounds be sealed', or 'Mend thy body', or –"

"Or maybe even something not retarded," said Cooper.

Dave ignored him. "So maybe try 'I release thee.'?"

"The what?"

"Jesus, Katherine," said Tim. "Just say it."

"Fine." Katherine placed her palm on Tyrell's massive chest and closed her eyes. "I release thee."

Tyrell blinked. "What is this? Where am I?" He looked down at Tim. "Wait… Did I just punch you in the face? I'm sorry."

"It's cool," said Tim. "I get that a lot."

Katherine leaned into his view, grinned like a horror movie clown, and waved. "Remember me?"

"JESUS!" cried Tyrell, jumping back from her. "Hold up. Ain't you the crazy rat lady outside the – Oh no!" He cupped his hands over his mouth. "Tell me I didn't punch Mr. Ellis in the face."

"He was an asshole," said Katherine. "You can do better than that."

"He's like a father to me!" said Tyrell. "Dude just gave me a raise." He looked around the room angrily. "You freaks just cost me my job!"

"Join the club, Bub," said Stacy.

Tyrell pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, frantically jabbing at the screen as he backed out of the doorway. He got into his truck. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Ellis. I don’t know what came over me… I appreciate that, sir… Yes, sir. I’ll be there right away.” Any conversation beyond that was drowned out by the engine roaring to life and the squeal of tires.

“Call me!” Katherine shouted out after him.

“Hey,” said Julian. “Did you know you can turn into a bat?”

“Yeah,” said Katherine. “It’s awesome. What’s with the rabbits?”

Tim closed and locked the door behind her. “We bought them for you and – Hey, where’s your little friend?”

“He tried to eat Butterbean, so I threw him through the window. He took off.”

Randy clapped his hands together. “Well, that’s one mystery solved.”

Katherine squatted down over Butterbean. “How are you doing, sweetie?” The wolf gave her a weak growl. Katherine stood up. “He’s getting better already.”

“Katherine!” cried Tim. “You set an NPC vampire loose in Gulfport?”

“He’ll be fine.”

“I don’t give a fuck about *him*!” said Tim. “If he starts turning people, we could have an epidemic on our hands. What’s the point of chasing after Mordred to get ourselves back to normal if the world gets overrun with vampires?”

“How’s the Mordred hunt going?”

“Not well. We’re back to square one. Worse than that really, considering he knows we’re after him now, and we’ve got no leads.”

“That’s not true,” said Stacy. “What about the game?”

“What game?” asked Julian.

“I looked up Mordred on Facebook earlier,” said Tim. “The fat bastard is already trying to recruit new players. It’s a good idea, but I don’t see him inviting any of us. He’ll be expecting us to track him down on the internet. He knows our faces. Our real faces.”

“Don’t take no time to set up a fake account,” said Dennis. “Grab a stock photo off the net, and you’re good to go. Fellas down at the station do it all the time to set up stings and whatnot.” He looked down at his shoes. “A few of them have been known to use the same trick for more nefarious purposes.”

“No good,” said Tim. “New account. No friends, no posting history. Way too suspicious. Mordred’s on high alert.”

“What about me?” said Stacy.

“What about you?”

“I’ve got a Facebook account. Friends, cat memes, the whole works.

And I'm not connected to any of you freaks."

"I don't know," said Tim. "That might be even more suspicious. An attractive woman messaging him from out of the blue."

"Pffft," said Katherine.

"It'll work," said Dave. "Mordred doesn't see himself like everyone else sees him."

"Like the bastard child of George Lucas and Jabba?" said Cooper.

"Exactly," said Dave. "Remember when he first came in here, strolling around like he was the emperor of Rome? He's arrogant. His long-standing role as Cavern Master has distorted his sense of how people perceive him. A pretty girl sending him a message will only serve to feed his over-inflated ego."

"Aaawwww," said Stacy. "You boys are just too much!"

"Also," said Cooper. "If there's anything a guy will let his guard down for, it's a hot piece of tail."

"Come on guys," said Katherine, her hands on her hips. "She's like a six, tops."

"That's it," said Stacy, stepping out from behind her table.

Katherine hissed and bared her fangs.

"I've compromised my integrity for less than a six before," said Cooper.

Tim hopped down from his chair and dove at Stacy's feet. They both crashed to the floor.

"Ew!" said Stacy. "Why's the floor so sticky? When's the last time you mopped?"

Katherine loomed over them. She ran her tongue over her fangs.

"Get the hell out of here and go find that little vampire shit!" said Tim.

"Hmph," said Katherine. "Six ain't worth it. I'd rather eat rats." She tossed her hair back and walked toward the front door.

"Hold on," said Tim, standing up. "Cooper's going with you."

"I am?" said Cooper.

"Yes," said Tim. "If it comes down to a vampire fight, you should more than tip the scale in Katherine's favor. Just try to stay out of sight as best you can. Bring the Bag of Holding. Kill him if you have to, but try to just bag him."

"He's only three feet tall," said Katherine. "I think I can handle him myself. Cooper will just slow me down."

"I'm not taking any chances. You go together. Take Randy's van. Randy, keys."

Randy tossed his keys to Katherine, who snatched them out of the air as quick as a frog tongue.

"I'll go with them," said Chaz. "I have experience with vampires."

Cooper snorted as he reentered from the back with the Bag of

Holding. “You have experience being a vampire’s bitch.”

“Keep talking, Cooper,” said Chaz. “We’ll see how tough you talk after we get those dice back and we both return to normal.”

“Come on, Cooper,” said Katherine.

Cooper gave Chaz a wide grin and a middle finger as he and Katherine walked out the front door.

It occurred to Dave that nobody except Katherine knew what Chaz’s true form looked like. He guessed from the nature of his threat that he was probably a big guy. That was good. Cooper could use a good pounding.

“I need you here, Chaz,” said Tim.

“What for?” said Chaz. “I’m just a *bard*, remember?”

“I need you to pretend to be Stacy on Facebook.”

“What the hell for?” asked Chaz. “Why can’t Stacy be Stacy?”

“I *am* pretty good at it,” said Stacy.

“I’m sorry, Stacy,” said Tim. “You’re really pretty. And you’re smart, and funny, and you’ve really been a great sport about all this.”

“Aw, that’s sweet.”

“But we’ve only got one shot at this, and Chaz has a higher Charisma than you.”

“I hate your whole family.”

As much fun as it was watching Tim make an ass of himself, the hours of being jostled against the metal walls of Randy’s van were beginning to take their toll, and the desire for sleep became too heavy a burden to bear. Dave climbed onto the cracked vinyl bench of one of the Chicken Hut’s booths. He was out before his face hit the table.

Chapter 13

Cooper waited patiently in the van's passenger seat for Katherine. He had a pretty good grasp of her tolerance of him, and he knew he was near the line. At any other time, that would be great. She was a fun one to get riled up. But he hadn't known he'd have to go out driving with her, and he wanted her to let him sit up front. The back of the van smelled like… well, like him.

Katherine stomped out of the Chicken Hut with her hand wrapped around a rabbit's neck. Thankfully, it wasn't little Ron Jeremy. She appeared to have run a brush through her hair and a wet wipe over her face. She got into the driver's seat and slammed the door so hard that Cooper was surprised it remained attached to the frame.

"Sorry," she huffed. "I'm still getting used to my new strength."

"Tell me about it." Cooper flexed his pectoral muscles, discovering the limit of the seatbelt's give. A tiny fart squeaked out of his ass. It was loud for its size.

Katherine didn't hit him or swear at him or anything. She just rolled down the window and stroked the plump, white, furry bunny on her lap. "I'm pretty, right?"

That was a left hook Cooper had not seen coming. He'd been prepared for a punch in the arm, even if it was from a vampire. But the last thing he needed was Katherine unloading her insecurities and feelings and shit on him. "Um… sure?"

"I've got a lot of good qualities. Any guy would be lucky to have me."

"Fuckin' A."

"I'm smart. I'm attractive. I'm good with kids… when they're not being little assholes." She held up the rabbit in Cooper's face. "See? I love animals."

The rabbit looked at Cooper with pink, pleading eyes. *Sorry, friend.*

"Goddammit!" said Katherine, looking down at her lap. There were three little brown pellets. "The little bitch shit on me!" She brought the rabbit to her mouth and tore a hole in its neck. Blood dribbled down her chin as she sucked the dead bunny dry. The spectacle was both horrifying and strangely erotic.

When the rabbit was about a third of its original size, the sucking and slurping stopped. Cooper willed his dick to stop hardening. They settled at a semi.

"That's way better than rat," said Katherine. She ran a finger across her chin and looked at it. "I got some on me?"

"It's cool," said Cooper, who was feeling anything but cool. "I'm sure ol' Randy's got some tissues in here." He reached for the glove

compartment.

"Fuck it," said Katherine. "She wiped the clean side of the rabbit corpse on her face, wiping off most of the blood. Then she stuffed the dead rabbit's head in her mouth and bit down until there was an audible crunch. "Ew, bone," she said, whipping her tongue past her lips and spitting out bits of rabbit skull. She tossed the stained, mutilated husk of former bunny out the window and turned on the ignition.

Cooper stared at her. *That was some fucked up shit.*

"What?" said Katherine. "It's biodegradable, right?"

"Uh…"

"I'm high as fuck. Let's get out of here."

Tires squealed and the van jolted forward. They rolled over the curb before pulling out onto Highway 90, narrowly avoiding getting smashed into by an oncoming car.

"Asshole!" the driver shouted over the sound of his own horn as he swerved around them.

"Hey fuck you!" Katherine shouted back. Once she settled on a lane, her driving was less erratic. "So, where to?"

"Let's swing by Papa Joe's," said Cooper.

"We're supposed to be hunting a vampire," said Katherine. "Not picking up a pizza."

"Do you know where Count Suckula is?"

"His name is Ginfizzle, and no."

"Then we'll just as likely find him at Papa Joe's as anywhere else, right?"

"I guess."

"Derek the night manager should be working now. He's a dick. I want to scare the shit out of him."

"You're supposed to be keeping a low profile."

"All part of the plan."

"Good enough for me," said Katherine.

Cooper spent the next ten minutes leaning back in his seat, trying to obscure his face from other cars as much as possible while still being able to see out the window. There was no sign of any rampaging midgets.

"Pull over," said Cooper. "Stop here."

"Why?" asked Katherine, but she pulled the van over and stopped on the shoulder.

"You see the Taco Bell on the other side of Papa Joes?" Cooper couldn't read either sign himself, but he recognized the logos. Being illiterate was surprisingly easy around here.

"Yeah?"

"Pull the van into that parking lot."

"What for?"

"It doesn't connect with the Papa Joe's parking lot. I'm going to run in through the front door and out through the back. Nobody will be able to catch me on foot, and if they want to follow us in a car, they'll have to drive all the way around to Baywater Boulevard and maybe even stop at a light. We'll be long gone."

"That's a pretty sophisticated plan," said Katherine. "I thought you were supposed to be like borderline retarded."

"I am," said Cooper. "It's not my plan. Some punks pulled the same trick on us last Halloween." He opened the door and got out of the van. "Fuckers made off clean with five pizzas."

When Katherine drove off, Cooper ducked behind a billboard advertising a Casino. Having a few minutes to kill, he decided to rub one out. The surefire cure for an unwanted erection. He tried to think of other things. Japanese porn. Daphne from Scooby-Doo. Even his failsafe, Martha Stewart. But his mind kept roaming back to the image of Katherine sucking on that rabbit. What the fuck did that say about him? Now was not the time to contemplate such things. He gave in to his half-orc dick's will and embraced the slurping and sucking noises, the single drop of red blood that fell between her pale breasts, her tongue, slick with fresh blood, running over her smeared lips. Just when he was getting into the rhythm that would take him to climax, he noticed a stray, mangy Border Collie staring up at him a few feet away.

"Fuck off, dog," said Cooper. "I can't concentrate when you're looking at me."

The dog started panting, its tongue hanging out.

"Dude, this isn't a fucking show. Beat it." Cooper was losing his rhythm. The feeling was starting to fade. He closed his eyes and tried to get it back. For a second he felt like he almost had it again, but he could still feel the dog watching him. He peeked.

The dog was staring at him with its big, stupid eyes.

"Stop judging me, damn you!" said Cooper. "I'm not proud of this!" After thirty more seconds of frantic stroking, he conceded defeat. The moment had passed. He'd blue-balled himself.

Cooper opened the Bag of Holding and crept toward the dog. "Come here, shithead. I'm going to watch Katherine eat you, and I'm going to whack it to that image for a month."

Just when Cooper judged he was within pouncing distance, the dog up and ran off.

"Damn it!" shouted Cooper. Then he ducked back behind the billboard, suddenly remembering that he was supposed to be hiding. He peeked around for a view of the Taco Bell parking lot. The van was there, lights still on. How long had Katherine been waiting? No more

time to waste.

His plan was not a complicated one, and might score him something to wear other than his ratty loincloth. Derek was fat enough that Cooper might be able to fit into his clothes. Sure, he could probably just ask Katherine to go steal something for him at Walmart, but this was more fun.

Cooper recognized Todd's car in the parking lot. Hopefully, he'd go on a delivery before another driver returned from one, leaving Derek in there alone.

Sure enough, Todd walked out the front door carrying three pizza bags. *Triple run. They must be busy.*

As soon as Todd's car left the lot, Cooper made his move. He sprinted across the empty lot the billboard was in front of, and onto Papa Joe's property. He stormed in through the front door screaming nonsense.

"BWAARRARAGGAWAAARRGGHH!" said Cooper.

"Wah!" said Derek, his little piggy eyes looking back at Cooper. "Who are you? What do you want?" He was wearing his trademark red Papa Joe's hoodie. It could be a hundred degrees outside, and this fat bastard was always wearing a hoodie.

"I want you!" said Cooper, and hopped over the counter.

"Stop right there!" said Derek. He threw an empty deep-dish pizza tray at Cooper and made a break for the office. "I'm calling the police!"

"The fuck you are!" Cooper sprang across the floor, beating Derek to the office. Derek turned around and tried to run the other way, but Cooper caught him by the back of his sweatshirt and pulled it over his head, effectively blinding and incapacitating him.

"Please!" cried Derek through the back of the shirt covering his face. "Take whatever's in the register! Just please don't kill me!"

This blubbering fucktard was the one who had sent Cooper to deliver eight free pizzas way out of their delivery area to his sister's bachelorette party during the Saturday evening rush. The address had been misspelled and it had taken Cooper forever to find the place. And then that reptilian pig of a bachelorette didn't even tip him. Payback's a bitch.

Cooper wrestled the hooded sweatshirt the rest of the way off of Derek, revealing a black T-shirt underneath. While he couldn't read the words, the four bearded hillbillies were recognizable enough. "Seriously, dude?" said Cooper. "Duck Dynasty?"

Derek wiped a tear off of his fat, rosy cheek. "That's quality programming. It's on the *Arts and Entertainment* Network."

"Take off your pants."

After a brief and horrified stare, Derek made a run for the pizza

oven. Cooper chased after him, and soon had him cornered, but Derek had armed himself with the long, two-pronged fork they used to pop dough and cheese bubbles while the pizzas were baking.

"You stay back now, you… you… whatever you are. Hellspawn!"

A pizza fell off the oven conveyer belt, splattering upside down on the floor between them. Cooper used the distraction to try and grab the fork. Derek wasn't about to let go of his only defense, meager as it was, quite so easily. He held on with both hands. Cooper pulled, but didn't have a very good grip. Derek took a step forward and slipped on the pizza. The fork flew out of both their hands, across the restaurant, and lodged into the cork bulletin board next to the office.

Cooper wrestled Derek onto his back. It was like trying to flip a manatee. He worked on unbuckling the belt while shrugging off weak punches and cries of protest.

"Please! Stop! I'm saving myself! For Jesus!"

"I don't think you're his type," said Cooper. "Hold still! Look, you've got fucking tomato sauce smeared all over your pants." Then he noticed the darkness radiating from Derek's crotch. "Goddammit!" He had just gotten the belt undone. Ah well, they were going to be covered in piss sooner or later.

Cooper peeled the pants inside-out down Derek's legs, but they got stuck on his shoes. Derek was flailing his arms around and trying to kick Cooper, and Cooper was trying to reach inside the inverted pants to remove Derek's shoes, when the front door opened.

"Cooper!"

He'd been found out. His cover was blown. His bowels abandoned ship, a jet of shit splattering on the tiled floor.

Cooper knew the voice well. It was C.J., fellow Papa Joe's pizza delivery driver, and all around bad motherfucker. *How had he recognized him?*

"This is the sixth motherfucking message I've left on your phone. You get your lazy, stupid ass to the store right now, else I'm gonna – WHAT THE FUCKING FUCK!" C.J. dropped his phone, his mouth wide open, looking from Cooper to Derek to the steamy, fresh puddle of shit around Cooper's feet, and then back up at Cooper.

"This isn't what it looks like," said Cooper.

"Help me!" cried Derek. "The devil wants my innocence!"

"I just want his pants," said Cooper.

"Fuck this shit," said C.J. He ran out of sight and through the front door.

Cooper finally managed to get one of Derek's shoes off. He threw it at Derek's head.

"Ow!" said Derek.

The other shoe came off easier, and with it the pants. Cooper

removed his loincloth, and Derek curled into a ball, sobbing on the floor.

"Please don't!"

Cooper pulled the pant legs through again so they weren't inside-out, and slipped them on his own legs. They were a little snug and wet, but they'd do. The hoody fit much better. Cooper pulled the hood over his head and looked at his reflection in the pizza oven. He could almost pass for an ugly, giant, slightly deformed human.

"B-b-but…" Derek stammered. "But why?"

Cooper looked down sternly at him. "Because you don't *deserve* this uniform." He shoved his loincloth and six pizzas which were waiting to be delivered into the Bag of Holding and walked out the back door.

Chapter 14

Stacy: Hello? Is this Mordred? Or am I supposed to call you Cavern Master?

"How's that for an opener?" asked Chaz. He leaned back as far as he could, which wasn't very far, so the others could see the computer screen. The Chicken Hut office was barely larger than a walk-in closet, definitely not enough room for half a dozen people, most of whom smelled like varying degrees of Cooper.

"I would never say that," said Stacy.

"I don't like it," said Tim. "It could be interpreted as snarky, like you're making fun of him."

"What if you put a heart behind it?" asked Julian.

"I would absolutely never do that," said Stacy.

"Uh-uh," said Tim. "Too forward. You've got to reel him in like a big game fish."

"A wink?" said Julian.

"Nope," said Stacy.

"Definitely better than a heart," said Tim. "A wink might just be friendly, or it might be more. But I still don't like the wording. Maybe change the 'am I supposed to' to 'should'?"

"Okay," said Chaz. He deleted the whole thing and retyped it.

Hello? Is this Mordred? Or should I call you Cavern Master? wink

"How's that?"

"It's stupid!" said Stacy. "It reads like the first line of a low-budget porno."

"That's kind of the point," said Chaz. "We're trying to seduce him, right?" The repulsive task of trying to seduce some fat, sweaty dork was made all the more so by everyone second-guessing his approach.

"You don't have to seduce him," said Stacy. "He's a guy. Just give him enough rope, and he'll try to seduce you."

"Oh that's good," said Tim. "Make him think it's all his idea, and she's just falling for his wily charm. I like it."

"Thank you," said Stacy.

"So, I should drop the wink?"

"Who's Morded?" asked Professor Goosewaddle. His head was practically in Chaz's crotch as he tried to look at the monitor. "What is this magical device?"

"I think it sounds fine just the way it is," said Randy. "Course, I ain't allowed on social media anymore, as per the terms of my probation."

"Thank you, Randy," said Chaz. "Where's the bird? Maybe he wants to weigh in?"

“Ravenus is outside,” said Julian. “I can go and get him if you like. He always gets so excited when someone asks his opinion.”

“I like the wink,” said Dennis. “I think you should keep it.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you think,” said Chaz. It came out harsher than he meant it to, but all these people were driving him nuts.

“Oh right,” said Dennis. “What do I know what a man wants?” His voice choked. “I’m not a man anymore!” he sobbed. He pushed his way out of the room. “Excuse me.”

“Julian,” said Tim. “Go keep an eye on him.”

“Two down,” Chaz murmured to himself. “Hey Professor. You mind giving me some space?”

“Why not just start with ‘Hello’?” said Stacy. “See where it goes from there. Let him lead the conversation.”

“I liked the ‘or should I call you Cavern Master’ bit,” said Tim. “It plays into his whole power thing.”

“You can still use it,” said Stacy, “if it comes up naturally.”

Tim shrugged. “Fine.”

Chaz deleted everything except for the word ‘Hello’. “Agreed.”

“I still think you ought to put some kind of smiley at the end,” said Randy. “You never know what little gesture might brighten up a person’s day.”

Chaz pressed the ‘Enter’ key.

Stacy: Hello.

Tim let out a shallow laugh. “You’re really pushing the limits of that high Charisma score.”

“Maybe if I didn’t have a million people giving me conflicting advice and a hairy old gnome trying to blow me, I could –” The computer speaker beeped.

Mordred: Greetings and salutations! wink

“What a fucking loser,” said Tim.

“Astounding!” said Professor Goosewaddle. “The magic box responded! It’s like a fixed portal to another world.” He climbed onto Chaz’s lap and waved his arms. “Hello! Who’s in there?”

“He can’t see you,” said Chaz.

“What if I put my hand through and waved?” Before Chaz could stop him, he shoved the monitor. It fell over backwards. “I’m so sorry.”

“Can somebody get him out of here?” said Chaz.

“Come on, Professor,” said Stacy. “Let’s take a walk. We’ll let the love doctors practice their art.”

Finally, Chaz had some room to breathe. “What should I say next?”

“Do the ‘should I call you Cavern Master’ line,” said Tim.

“And add the wink this time,” said Randy.

“Why not?” said Tim. “Mordred already did.”

Stacy: Is this Mordred? Or should I call you Cavern Master? wink

Mordred: You can call me whatever you like, baby. Just as long as you call me. wink wink heart LOL

This was so sad and embarrassing.

"Is he fucking with us?" asked Tim. "Is our cover blown?"

"I don't know," said Chaz. "I think he's buying it."

"Hurry up. Ask him about the game."

Stacy: I saw your ad for a Caverns and Creatures match.

"What the hell does that mean?" asked Tim.

"Shut up," said Chaz. "I'm playing dumb, giving him a chance to *educate* me."

"No way. He's never going to –"

Mordred: Have you ever played Caverns and Creatures before?

Stacy: No blush

Mordred: So you're a C&C virgin?

Chaz clapped his hands triumphantly. "And the sexual innuendo begins."

"I don't know," said Tim. "He said the same thing to Julian the night we met him. You'd better egg him on a little more."

Stacy: Hey now! Wouldn't you like to know! wink

Mordred: Only if you'd like to tell. wink

"He types pretty fast with one hand," said Chaz.

"Yeah," said Tim. "This is starting to make me sick. Try and talk about the game some more."

Stacy: A lady doesn't kiss and tell.

Mordred: You can tell the Cavern Master. wink

"Jesus," said Tim. "Is he really trying to leverage his Cavern Master status for sex chat?"

"This is embarrassing," said Chaz.

"I kinda feel bad for the guy," said Randy.

"I don't even know how to respond to that."

Stacy: wink wink wink

"Ask him about the game!" said Tim. "Come on, before he blows his load."

Stacy: So how about the game?

Mordred: I have a session this coming Thursday. I have three players already signed up. I'm looking for one more.

Stacy: So you have an opening I can fill?

"Dude!" said Tim. "Too far!"

Mordred: I've got more than one. wink

"Ugh," said Tim. "I don't even want to know what the implications behind that are."

Randy cleared his throat. "I think he may have been referring to his –"

"I said I don't want to know!"

Mordred: The rules are a little tricky the first few times you play. Lot's of dice and statistics and math. Everyone else at the table will be veteran players.

"What the hell is this?" said Chaz. "He shot his wad and now he's trying to discourage Stacy from playing?"

"Impossible," said Tim. "That might be the case if Stacy was ugly. But Mordred isn't going to shoo away a girl this far out of his league. I don't think he shot his wad just yet. Play along. Act like you're starting to have second thoughts."

"But –"

"Just do it. I think I know where he's going with this."

Stacy: Oh… That sounds hard.

Mordred: wink

"Ew!" said Tim. "Jesus, Mordred. You're worse than Cooper."

Mordred: Would you be interested in meeting beforehand? I could run you through the basics. We could even make a character together.

"Yikes," said Chaz. "I seriously hope that's not innuendo."

Stacy: When/Where did you have in mind?

Mordred: Are you free right now? Maybe we could grab a bite to eat?

Chaz looked at Tim, who nodded his head excitedly.

Stacy: I am kind of hungry.

Mordred: Where do you live? I'll pick you up.

"Damn," said Tim. "That's no good. Play it cautious. That will sell the story better anyway."

Chaz bit his lower lip as he considered what he wanted to say.

Stacy: I'm sorry, but I don't know you. (Can't be too careful! wink) Maybe we could meet in a public place?

Tim rubbed his hands together. "Perfect."

Mordred: Where do you want to meet?

Stacy: You choose.

"What the hell did you say that for?" said Tim.

"What?" said Chaz. "I thought we were trying to let him feel like he's the one in charge."

"He just gave us the perfect opportunity to choose a strategic venue! Remote, high visibility from a distance, limited routes to and from, those sorts of things.

"Wait," said Chaz. "So what's the plan here? You're not trying to use Stacy as bait, are you? We're just going to set up a meeting, and then rush in and grab him when he turns up, right?"

"Out in public? That's too dangerous. Too many things could go wrong. I was thinking Stacy could get Mordred to take her back to his place, and we follow them."

"That sounds like a *less* dangerous plan to you?" said Randy.

"We need to sneak into his house," said Tim. "If we try to confront him out in the open, he might summon the Horsemen, and then we'll all be fucked."

"Shouldn't we at least run this plan by Stacy?" asked Chaz.

"Pfft," said Tim. "She'll be thrilled to be a part of it. What's taking him so long?"

"He's probably never had a date before," said Chaz. "He's toiling about where to take her."

"That makes sense," said Tim. "Ten bucks says he settles on Olive Garden."

"No way," said Chaz. "Give the guy a little credit, huh?"

"Hmph," said Tim. "Make it twenty."

"I'll take that action."

Mordred: Do you know the Olive Garden in D'Iberville?

Chaz hung his head. "What a fucking loser. I'll have to owe you that twenty. I left my wallet in my other body."

"I like Olive Garden," said Randy. "Them breadsticks is good."

"Ha ha ha!" said Tim, repeatedly punching Chaz on the arm. "That's right near the Arby's we went to before! He's got to live right around there!"

Stacy: Ooh, Olive Garden! My favorite.

"Easy on the sarcasm, dude," said Tim.

Stacy: How's 9:00?

Mordred: Fantastic!

Stacy: See you there. wink heart

"Jesus," said Chaz, pushing the keyboard away from him and leaning back in the chair. "I think I need a shower."

"You did great," said Tim. "Nice work." He leaned out of the office door. "Stacy, can you come back here for a minute?" He came back inside, grabbed a pack of cigarettes out of a desk drawer, and lit one up.

"What's up?" said Stacy, poking her head through the doorway.

"I'll tell you what's up," said Tim. He raised an eyebrow and pointed at her. "You've got a date tonight, baby!"

"Aw honey, that's sweet," said Stacy, smiling sympathetically down at Tim. "But maybe we should wait until you get back to your real body? It's just kinda weird this way."

Randy snorted, then quickly covered his mouth.

Tim exhaled two columns of smoke from his nostrils. "I wasn't talking about with me. You've got a date with Mordred. Olive Garden. Nine O'clock."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?"

Randy failed to contain a stream of chubby man-giggles.

Tim frowned. "I honestly thought you'd be more receptive to this."

"*Receptive?*" said Stacy. "To the idea of hooking up with your fat, sadistic loser friend?"

"You don't have to hook up with him," said Tim. "You just need to get him to bring you back to his place. We'll take care of the rest."

"What!" said Stacy. "That's worse than the fucking Olive Garden!"

"What do you folks have against the Olive Garden?" asked Randy. "They make a good salad."

Stacy put her hands on her hips and leaned down until she was nose to nose with Tim. "Do you know what I did to the last guy who took me to the Olive Garden?"

Tim swallowed hard. He appeared to be having a hard time not looking down her shirt. "What?"

Stacy sliced the air in front of Tim's face horizontally with her index finger. "Nothin'."

Tim nodded. "Your point is well made."

Stacy stood up straight and turned to Chaz. "Get out of that chair. Let me see how bad you idiots have maligned my reputation."

Chaz stood up, and Stacy took his place.

"Remember," said Tim. "These are private messages. Nobody can see this but you and Mordred."

Stacy scrolled up through the conversation. "Come on, guys! *You have a hole I can fill?* Who says that?"

"It worked, didn't it?"

"Oh sure, now that I've all but promised to *fill his holes*."

"We'll be watching you the whole time."

"Do you have any idea how creepy that sounds?"

"You know what I mean," said Tim. "We've got to find out where he lives so that we can steal his dice."

"I don't know," said Stacy. "What if you lose us?"

"Impossible," said Tim. "He won't even know we're there. We can tail him from a distance because we'll have Ravenus in the air."

"What's a Ravenus?"

"Julian's familiar."

"The *bird*?"

Tim lowered his head. "Yeah."

"How many people have gotten raped and murdered under the watchful protection of a bird before, right?"

"Does that mean you'll do it?" asked Tim. "Or are you being sarcastic."

"Both," said Stacy. "You guys owe me big time."

Chapter 15

Whatever Cooper was doing inside Papa Joe's was taking forever, and Katherine was coming down from her rabbit blood high. Summoning rats was always an option. There were bound to be plenty around Taco Bell. But the place was kind of busy at present, and it was probably best not to summon a swarm of rats right there in the parking lot. She wondered if there was a PetSmart nearby.

If she turned into a bat, she could scan the area for one real quick, but even if she found one, running in and stealing some rabbits would take too much time, leaving Cooper stranded and alone after whatever trouble he was causing at Papa Joe's. Still, the bat thing might work for a little spy mission. Just what the hell was he getting up to in there?

Katherine rolled down her window.

"Oops!" she said for the benefit of anyone who might be watching or listening. She pretended to drop something on the floor and bent over to pick it up. When she felt she was completely out of anyone's view, she closed her eyes and willed herself into bat form.

The transformation only took a few seconds. When she opened her eyes, the inside of the van looked enormous. She climbed up the vinyl interior of the driver's side door with her hooked little bat thumb claws until she reached the open window. She poked her head up and looked from side to side. The coast was clear. Letting go of the door, she pushed down on the air with her wings and flew out the window.

The front of Papa Joe's was all glass, which would allow her a great view of whatever was going on inside. But the parking lot was too well lit. In order to avoid drawing any unnecessary attention, she decided to peek in through the little window on the back door first. Just as she was approaching, the door swung open, and the window smacked her right in the bat face. *Ouch.*

Sandwiched between the window of the open door and the exterior wall of the building, Katherine saw a man fleeing the scene. He wore stained khaki pants and a red sweatshirt with the hood pulled up over his head. Did he just rob the store? Was Cooper okay? Wait a second… was this guy making a beeline for her van? It sure looked that way. The lights were still on and the engine was running. He was probably going to try to carjack her.

Katherine closed her eyes and willed herself into half-elf form again. When she felt her bare feet on cool pavement, she opened her eyes and pushed the door hard. It quickly swung shut.

"Ow!" came a muffled voice from inside. *Oops.*

She couldn't beat this thug to the van on half-elf feet, so she

transformed again, this time into a wolf.

Her paws barely touched the pavement as she bounded toward her prey. It was incredible how fast she could run, almost as invigorating as flying through the air. He'd still beat her to the van, but not by much. She let out a sharp bark as she closed the gap, hoping to distract him before he had a chance to open the door.

"Huh?" said the man, turning around.

Katherine leaped forward and bit him right in the crotch.

"Son of a motherfucker!" He had a distinctive half-orcish growl in his voice. *Oops.* He punched her in the face.

Katherine let go of Cooper's crotch and quickly transformed back into her half-elf form.

"Katherine!" said Cooper. "Oh shit, are you okay?"

"You punched me!"

"You bit me in the dick!"

Katherine sat up. "I thought you were carjacking me."

"What are you talking about?" said Cooper. "This was our plan, remember?"

"I'm sorry," said Katherine. "I didn't recognize you. What are you doing dressed like that anyway? You're just asking to be attacked."

"By racists maybe," said Cooper. "Not by fucking wolves!"

"Hands where I can see 'em, nigger," said a voice behind Cooper. A tall man stood behind Cooper, holding a Taco Bell bag in one hand, and huge, shiny steel Dirty Harry revolver in the other. His flannel shirt was stretched tight around the gut, tucked into his jeans.

Katherine raised her eyebrows at Cooper. "You called that one."

"Come on, now. Get 'em up." Katherine's would-be savior cocked the hammer back on his gun. It was no doubt designed to be intimidatingly audible. Cooper raised his arms. "Are you okay, miss? Did this man hurt you?"

Katherine felt a familiar sensation inside her. Something like rage, but more focused. She opened her eyes wide at the stranger. "Lower your weapon right now!" she growled.

"As you command, Master." He bent down and placed the gun on the ground.

"And the food," Cooper whispered to Katherine.

"And the food!"

The man placed the Taco Bell bag next to the gun.

"Do you have a checking account?"

"Yes ma'am."

"How much money do you have in there?"

"Bout two grand."

"I want you to go home right now and make out a check to the United Negro College Fund for two thousand dollars. Look up the

address and drop it in the mailbox before you go to bed tonight. Do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am. Right away, ma'am."

Katherine bared her fangs. "Go now!" The big goofy bastard nearly tripped over his own feet running across the parking lot. "I could get used to this."

Cooper scooped up the gun and the Taco Bell bag. He shoved the former into his belt and pulled a wrapped food item out of the latter. "The United Negro College Fund?"

"It was the only thing I could think of off the top of my head," said Katherine. She frowned at whatever culinary monstrosity Cooper was unwrapping. She couldn't stomach Taco Bell even before her diet consisted exclusively of rodents. "How can you eat that?"

Cooper grinned. "A Beefy 5-Layer Burrito is a terrible thing to waste." He shoved the whole thing in his mouth.

"Get in the van," said Katherine. "We need to try to find Ginfizzle."

Without any idea of where he might be, Katherine reasoned that she could cover more ground in less time by traveling on the I-10. She proposed driving east until they got to the Mississippi/Alabama state line and then turn around and drive west until she reached Louisiana or thought of a less stupid idea. Cooper made no objections, and fell asleep before she made it to the interstate.

She had only driven along the I-10 for about twenty miles when she started to seriously second-guess her strategy. She didn't even know what she was supposed to be looking for. The chances of actually spotting Ginfizzle while driving around on a random stretch of road weren't even worth thinking about. So what was she hoping to see? People running around screaming? She'd be better off in a more populated area for that. Maybe a fire or explosion if people started shooting at him near a gas station. It was a long shot. Ginfizzle didn't know anything about this world. He was hungry, sure. But he was also scared and alone. It wasn't too far of a stretch to think that he might have run out on the highway and caused an – And there it was.

A thirty-something-year-old black man was waving his arm on the side of the road. Katherine slowed down and pulled onto the shoulder. His white shirt was smeared with blood. He had a toddler in the arm he wasn't waving with. Her dress also had some blood on it. Neither of them seemed to be in too bad of shape, so Katherine could only assume that there was someone else still in the car which had smashed into a pine tree twenty yards off the road.

"Cooper, wake up," said Katherine, giving him a quick punch in the arm.

"I don't wanna go to Waffle House!" said Cooper. He sat up and shook his head. "Jesus!" he screamed at the sight of the blood-covered

man waving in the headlights.

"Put your hood on," said Katherine. "And pull the drawstring as tight as you can."

Cooper pulled the string until the hood covered his entire face, save for a small circle of bunched-together fabric in the front, making his face look like a big, red asshole.

Katherine got out of the van.

"Thank you for stopping," said the man. "I been out here waving close to twenty minutes now. Ain't nobody so much as slowed down."

"Are you hurt?" asked Katherine. "Is your baby okay?"

"She's just a little shook up is all. My wife's still in the car. She hit her head pretty bad on the –" He looked at Cooper, feeling his way forward along the side of the van. His eyes went from Cooper's covered face down to the big, steel gun handle sprouting out the front of his pants. "Hey man, we don't want no trouble."

"Oh what?" said Cooper, his voice muffled through the fabric. "Because I'm black?"

"Shut up, Cooper," said Katherine. "You're not black. They are."

"Oh sorry," said Cooper. "I can't see so well."

"He, um…" said Katherine. "He's got a birthmark that he's kind of ashamed of."

The man pressed his daughter's ear against his chest and covered her other ear with his hand. "Lady, I seen shit tonight that would make your teeth shake."

"What did you see?" asked Cooper.

"This skinny little white boy – couldn't be no more than fourteen years old – come runnin' out the woods onto the highway, naked as the day he was born. That's what made me swerve off the road. I thought I hit him. No, I *know* I hit him. I felt it. But after I hit that tree, I look back and see him get up and run off in the other direction."

"Which direction?" asked Katherine.

The man gave her a puzzled look, as if he'd been expecting any question but that one. He pointed into the woods on the north side of the highway. "He went that way."

"Can you move your wife to the van?"

"I'll need some help. Her door's jammed shut against the tree."

"Cooper, help him." Katherine reached for the child. "I'll hold her."

The man spoke to his daughter. "Bethany, this lady gonna watch you while daddy goes and helps mommy. Okay?" The little girl made no objections, or even any acknowledgment that she'd heard him. The man handed her to Katherine. "I thank you, ma'am."

Cooper followed the man to his car for a couple of steps, and then hesitated to look back at Katherine. Katherine cradled the child in her

arms as lovingly as she could pretend to do. The unspoken agreement was that she would not devour this little girl as soon as they stepped away. Cooper started walking to the wrecked car again.

Katherine held up the girl so that they were face to face. “You’re so pretty.”

Bethany blinked.

A part of Katherine wanted to tear right into the flesh of this ungrateful little brat, but she quieted those thoughts. “You’d be a lot prettier without all that nasty blood on your face.” She brought Bethany close and touched her cheek with the tip of her tongue. The blood was dry. The taste was good, but not great, like an overcooked grilled cheese sandwich. She licked the rest of the blood off of Bethany’s face, the whole time fighting the urge to tear open her arteries.

Katherine raised Bethany up to eye level again. “There you go, all clean!”

Bethany stared back at her, her eyes just a bit wider than they were before.

“You’s a strong dude, Mr. Cooper,” said Bethany’s father. Cooper walked beside him, the man’s wife in his arms. She was still alive. Katherine could sense that much.

“Put her in the passenger’s seat,” said Katherine. She held Bethany out to her father. “There you go, all cleaned up.”

“Cleaned up?” He took his daughter, inspected her face, then looked back at Katherine – specifically her mouth. “Did you… *lick* her?”

“She was raised by cats,” said Cooper.

“If you folks don’t mind, can we just get a ride to the nearest hospital?”

“Take the van,” said Katherine. She tossed him the keys.

“That’s mighty kind of you, ma’am, but –”

“We don’t need it. We have to go on foot from here.”

“Go where?” said the man. “Ain’t nothin’ for miles round here.”

“Don’t worry about us,” said Katherine. “You worry about getting your wife to a hospital.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He got into the driver’s seat and started up the engine.

“Where are we going?” asked Cooper.

“We’re going to get Ginfizzle.”

“How?”

“He was here recently,” said Katherine. “I’ll track him by scent.”

“You can do that?” asked Cooper.

“Not in this form.”

Bethany’s father shook his head. “I never will understand white people.” The van pulled away.

Chapter 16

Chaz waved goodbye as Tim, Julian, and Stacy drove off in Stacy's car for D'Iberville. Having seduced Mordred online, he was of little use now for anything but babysitting two hillbillies and a gnome.

Dave was still asleep at a table, his face sitting in a puddle of his own drool. Chaz was pretty tired himself, but he'd caught a few winks on the road. He'd let Dave get a full rest before making him take over guard duty.

Professor Goosewaddle had his nose in the Caverns and Creatures Monster Manual, studying it like a biology textbook. "Where did they get all of this detailed information about the Tarrasque?"

"I don't know," said Chaz. "Maybe they asked it."

"The Tarrasque cannot speak," said the professor. "It says so right here." He closed the book and stared at the cover. "No one's seen the Tarrasque in over four thousand years. People scarcely even believe it exists. Who is this Larry Lilacs who claims to know so much about it?"

Chaz chuckled to himself. "Oh, I think he's got a pretty solid claim there."

"He sounds like a charlatan as well as a bigot if you ask me."

"Hey," said Randy from the kitchen. "We's gettin' hungry."

Dennis licked his lips. "Tim mentioned somethin' bout some chicken earlier. You mind if we fire up the oven?"

"Knock yourselves out," said Chaz. He was feeling a little hungry himself. Chicken sounded pretty good. "You know how to work all that shit?"

"Ain't nothin' to it," said Randy. "I'm a veteran of the fast food industry myself." He said it like he'd served three tours in 'Nam.

"You don't say."

"I do indeed." He flicked a couple of switches. To his credit, the equipment immediately began to hum with life. "Y'all got any requests?"

Chaz looked up at the illuminated menu board above the counter. "Sweet 'N Tangy looks good."

"Dennis," said Randy. "Would you top off the oil in the fryer?"

"No problem."

"Chaz, would you mind grabbin' a box of Sweet 'N Tangy out the freezer?"

"Sure," said Chaz. Both Randy and Dennis watched him as he walked past them through the kitchen. Katherine had smashed the shit out of the freezer door's locking mechanism, so the door was held shut by a folding chair wedged under the outside handle. Chaz removed the chair and set it aside. The door swung open. The chilled air inside

the freezer still carried a faint scent of shit.

He wiped frost off the labels of some stacked cardboard chicken boxes. Blue labels were *Original*. Red labels were *Spicy*. That made sense. These boxes would be the biggest sellers, and there were far more of them than there were boxes with differently colored labels. A small stack of green and orange labeled boxes sat at the back of the freezer. Chaz guessed the orange ones were – The freezer door slammed shut. Chaz heard the folding chair being wedged back into place. *Oh no.*

He ran to the door and pushed. It didn't budge.

"Come on, Randy!" Dennis's voice called faintly through the thick, steel door. "Let's go!"

Chaz beat on the door. "Hey! Let me out of here!" It was pointless. The only ones who might have heard him were the ones who had trapped him in there. He backed up, then rammed his shoulder into the door. It hurt, but the door didn't give an inch. In his real body, he could bench two hundred fifty pounds. Now he couldn't overpower a goddamn folding chair.

He banged on the door as hard as he could, shouting for help at the top of his lungs until he finally ran out of breath.

"Hello?" said a high, faint voice. *Goosewaddle.*

"Professor!" said Chaz.

"Yes?" said Goosewaddle. "Where are you?"

"I'm in here," said Chaz, rapping sharply on the door. "The door's stuck."

"Ah yes," said Goosewaddle. "There appears to be some strange metallic apparatus holding it shut."

"It's called a chair," said Chaz. "Can you move it?"

After a brief scrape of metal on metal, the door swung open.

Professor Goosewaddle was carefully examining the folding chair. "Chair?"

Chaz ran through the open back door. There was no sign of Dennis or Randy.

"Shit!" he shouted. He'd never live this down. He stomped back into the Chicken Hut.

Professor Goosewaddle spread the rear legs of the chair apart from the front legs. The seat slid down to its horizontal position. "It *is* a chair! My, but that's clever."

"We are so fucked," said Chaz.

"Sit down," said the professor, gesturing proudly to the chair he'd just unfolded. "You seem distraught. Is something amiss?"

Chaz sat in the chair. "Do you have any idea what's going on here at all?"

Professor Goosewaddle looked away. "I'm afraid I don't."

"Randy and Dennis just escaped," said Chaz. "If they bring the police back here before we get Mordred, we're fucked with a capital FUCK."

"Would you like me to scry them?"

"To *what* them?" It had been a long time since he played C&C.

"Scry," said the professor. "It's a spell which allows me to see through their eyes."

"Hell yes!" said Chaz. "Do it!"

"I will require a mirror or a crystal ball."

"There's a mirror in the office."

"That one is cracked. The fragments are too small."

Chaz combed his fingers through his hair, thinking as hard as he could. Finally, it hit him. "The bathroom!" He ran out the back door again. "Follow me."

He ran around to the side of the building and pushed open the bathroom door. A warm, moist wave of urine and shit laden air forced him back a few steps. Bracing himself, he pushed the door open again. It looked like a shit grenade had been tossed in there. The toilet was utterly destroyed. Broken pieces of porcelain poked out like little icebergs in a brown sea of shit-water on the floor. As grim as the bathroom was, the one thing it had going for it was an unbroken mirror mounted on the wall.

"Merciful gods!" said Professor Goosewaddle. "What is this place? What happened in here?"

"This is a bathroom," said Chaz. "Cooper happened."

"How can I be expected to concentrate on my spell in an environment such as this?"

"You'll just have to do your best. We've got to hurry."

"Hurry indeed," said the professor. "I don't wish to spend one more second than is necessary in this foul pit."

Chaz picked up the professor and leaned in to place him atop the sink counter. Fortunately, it was close enough so that he didn't have to actually step into Cooper's half-orc gumbo.

Professor Goosewaddle looked into the mirror and choked out a few words that Chaz couldn't understand. After a few seconds passed, he said, "I see with the eyes of the one called Dennis."

"Where are they?" said Chaz.

"I do not know," said the professor. "I am not familiar with this place."

"Well what do you see?"

"He is running. To his left there is coastline, and a vast, moonlit sea."

"The Gulf," said Chaz. "So they're on the beach?"

"No," said the professor. "They are on the other side of the great

road. Dozens of those… oh, what were they called? Otto-mobiles?"

"Automobiles?" said Chaz. "You mean cars?"

"Yes, that's it," said the professor. "Do you know they light up in the front when it turns dark?"

"Car!" said Chaz. "That's where they're going. They're making a break for Dennis's squad car. We ditched it just a few miles away from – Hang on. Why didn't you use this Scry spell to help us find Mordred?"

"Who's Mordred?"

"You really have no clue as to anything that's going on around here, do you?"

Professor Goosewaddle shrugged. "Nobody tells me anything. I'm just a gnome."

"Let's go," said Chaz. "We're wasting time." He held out his arms to catch the professor.

Professor Goosewaddle jumped off the counter into Chaz's open arms. "You'll have to go alone. My little old legs can't move as fast as theirs."

"No way," said Chaz. "Those two rednecks would kick my ass. I need you to magic them." He ran around to the front of the building.

"But how?" asked the professor, waddling after him. "We have no Otto-mobiles."

"We've got something better," said Chaz. "An Otto-bike." He wheeled his motorcycle out from the other side of the building. The keys were still in the ignition. He'd only meant to step into the Chicken Hut for a second to see what was keeping Katherine when Mordred tricked him into rolling that die.

"What is that?" asked the professor, clearly mesmerized.

"It's like a car," said Chaz. "It goes just as fast, only on two wheels instead of four."

"You're mad!" said the professor. "I'm not riding on that thing!"

"Oh yes you are. It's the only way we'll catch them."

"Look at that thing!" cried the professor. "The only thing keeping it from falling over is a metal stick!"

Chaz pushed back the kickstand. "Happy?"

"And what happens if you let go of it?"

"What are you talking about?" said Chaz. His patience was wearing thin. "It'll fall over I guess."

"Exactly!" said the professor. "And that's when it's standing still. How much less stable will it be in motion?"

"It's plenty more stable in motion. That's the whole point!"

"You speak madness, boy! Have you ever tried to run with a book atop your head?"

"This is different," said Chaz. He understood Goosewaddle's

argument, and didn't know how to counter it. *Why does a bicycle or motorcycle stay upright while in motion?* He had no fucking idea. He just knew that it was true because – "How about a demonstration?"

"Come again?"

"If I show you that it's safe, if you see it with your own eyes, will you stop being a little bitch?"

"Absolutely not," said Professor Goosewaddle. "But please demonstrate anyway. I must see it."

Chaz put the kickstand down and crossed his arms. "No." He hoped Goosewaddle was as curious as he let on. Plan B involved tackling him, and Chaz knew that wouldn't end well.

"Oh please!"

"Only once we have an agreement."

Goosewaddle shook his little fists. "Fine! If it appears safe, I will ride with you."

Chaz mounted his bike and turned the key. The engine roared to life. He twisted the throttle, and it roared even louder. Professor Goosewaddle took a step back.

"Watch and learn," said Chaz strapping on his helmet.

"Oh, that's very reassuring," said the professor.

Chaz pulled out of the parking lot onto Beach Road. It felt good to be back on his bike. He rode up to the next light, turned around, and sped clear past the Chicken Hut. He caught Professor Goosewaddle staring slack-jawed at him. He made one more U-turn and pulled back into the Chicken Hut parking lot.

"Astounding!" said the professor. "It's like a wheeled, mechanical horse!"

"Bon Jovi made the same observation."

"Who?"

"Come on, Goosewaddle," said Chaz. "Time to saddle up."

"I'm sorry," said the professor. "It's just too terrifying. I can't possibly –"

Chaz grabbed the professor by his arm and pulled him up onto the seat behind him. "Now hold on, and don't try anything stupid or we'll both die."

Goosewaddle's long, continuous scream drowned out the engine noise as Chaz pulled out onto Beach Road again. The little guy had quite a grip, but Chaz didn't have time to worry about his kidneys being squeezed into his spine, or the unexpected rush of warmth he felt in the small of his back.

Also low on his list of worries was getting a speeding ticket. He was on his way to assault a cop anyway. They flew down Beach Road, swerving around cars or riding on the shoulder when they had to. As fast as they rode, it wasn't fast enough.

When they pulled up behind Dennis's car, Dennis stepped out from behind a nearby tree with a shotgun pointed at them.

"Get off the bike." Dennis's voice was shaky and nervous, which troubled Chaz far more than it would have if he'd been speaking forcefully and confidently. Arresting them might have worse consequences for him than just flat out murdering them.

"Take it easy, man," said Chaz. "Let's talk this through."

"Get off the bike!" His voice was more resolute this time, as if he'd come to a stronger decision as to which way he was leaning.

Chaz got off the motorcycle, put the kickstand down, and then put Professor Goosewaddle down. The professor dropped to his knees and vomited.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Dennis.

"He's never been on a motorcycle before."

Dennis scrunched up his face in confusion. "Never?"

"He's never even seen one." Chaz took a step forward. He didn't know what he was going to do. He wished he'd brought his lute along.

Dennis cocked the shotgun and held it up firmly at Chaz. "Not another step!"

"Easy, man," said Chaz, his hands in the air. "We can work this out."

"Ain't nothin' to work out," said Dennis. He sniffled, and a tear ran down his cheek. "Y'all cut my goddamn nuts off and fed 'em to a bird!" His words choked out, leading into sobs.

"Aw man, don't cry," said Chaz. "Now you're just making it weird."

"Say one more word!" sobbed Dennis, stepping forward and thrusting the gun at Chaz. "Go on, I dare you! Say one more goddamn w—"

He stopped talking. As a matter of fact, he just stopped altogether. He stood as still as a statue, his mouth frozen mid-word, and his finger frozen on the trigger of his shotgun.

Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Chaz stepped out of the path of the gun.

Dennis's gun being held out so far in front of him didn't leave him very well balanced for a person unable to control his actions. He started to tip forward.

"Goosewaddle!" cried Chaz. "Watch out!"

Professor Goosewaddle may have never seen a shotgun before, but the expression on his face said that he knew well enough that he didn't want to be at the business end of one. He rolled out of the way.

When Dennis hit the dirt, the gun went off with a deafening, explosive boom. It blasted Chaz's motorcycle all to hell.

"Shit!" screamed Chaz. "I haven't even finished paying for that yet!" He looked at Professor Goosewaddle. "What the hell just happened?

What did you do to him?"

Goosewaddle stood up and wiped some vomit off of his beard. "I cast a Hold Person spell on him. It won't last long. You may want to relieve him of his rod."

The shotgun blast was still ringing in Chaz's ears, but he heard a small whimper near his feet. He looked down. A single tear ran down Dennis's face.

"Relax, asshole," said Chaz. "I think he meant your gun." He took the shotgun out of Dennis's frozen hands just in time.

"—ord!" Dennis said, and immediately broke down in a sobbing fit.

Chaz pretended he was familiar with shotguns, imitating the pose Dennis had used to threaten him. "Reach into your pocket, pull out your car keys, and get in the back of the car."

Dennis did as he was told, crying the whole time. He crawled to his own squad car on his hands and knees. Once inside, Chaz closed the door behind him.

"What happened to the other one?" asked Professor Goosewaddle.

As if on cue, Randy barreled through some bushes. "Dennis! Are you okay?" His eyes met Chaz's. "Aw shit."

Chaz held the shotgun casually at his side. He didn't point it at Randy, but he wanted him to know it was there. "Come on, Randy. Get in the car."

Randy didn't look like he could run anymore if he'd wanted to. He wasn't in nearly as good of shape as Dennis, and his recent exertion left him a panting, sweaty mess. "I'm really sorry," he said between pants. "Dennis put me up to it. We was scared y'all was gonna kill us."

"I still might," said Chaz. "Look what he did to my bike!"

The motorcycle lay on its side, a complete wreck. The shotgun blast had hit it in the rear. The tire was flat, the chain broken, what was left of the shredded muffler had fused into the spokes. Completely unrideable.

Randy frowned. "I'll admit that *was* uncalled for."

Chaz opened the door to let Randy sit next to Dennis.

Dennis leaned on Randy's chest. "Hold me."

"There's powerful magic where we came from," said Chaz. "If you ever want to have a pair of testicles again, you'll behave."

Dennis stopped crying and looked up at Chaz. "Truly? Do you really think there's a chance I might –"

Chaz slammed the door shut. Maybe it was true. Maybe it was just false hope. He didn't give a shit about Dennis's testicles, but if it kept him in line for a while…

The drive back to the Chicken Hut, while uneventful, was probably the most intense six or seven minutes in Chaz's life. He'd watched a vampire murder his girlfriend, but that didn't even compare with

driving around in a stolen cop car with two hostages and a gnome.

Chapter 17

Stacy sat at the bar just inside the front entrance of the Olive Garden. Tim had shown her Mordred's Facebook profile picture, and explained how he'd changed since it was taken. Mostly facial hair and fat. Although the place was crowded, mostly with old couples and young families, there was no one in the restaurant that she could see who even remotely matched that description. She felt nervous, in spite of the fact that – or maybe because of the fact that – Tim had reassured her so many times that she had nothing to be afraid of. He and Julian had both exits covered, and the bird would follow the car when they left. Strangely enough, her nervousness was less about what this freak might do to her if he got the chance, and more like blind date jitters. After all she'd been through today, she deserved a drink.

"You here alone?"

Stacy whipped around. If this was Mordred, she might not have such a bad night after all. This guy was tall and handsome, with blond, wavy hair and a tailored blue suit. He was almost exactly the opposite of what Tim had described.

"Mordred?"

He gave her a shocked and exaggeratedly quizzical look. "I've been called a lot of things, but that one's new to me. My name's Brad Tanner." He offered his hand. Stacy accepted. His handshake was firm.

"That's too bad, *Brad*," said Stacy. "Looks like you're not the guy I'm waiting for tonight."

"Can I at least buy you a drink until this Mordred fellow shows up?"

"I won't stop you."

"What'll you have?"

"Surprise me."

"Bartender," said Brad. "Two Manhattans, please." He didn't shout, but he knew how to project his voice effectively, and the bartender acknowledged his order from the other side of the noisy bar.

"Right away, sir."

"So how do you know this Mordred?" Brad asked Stacy.

Considering the freak show that she was expecting to walk through the front door any second now, Stacy said the most embarrassing thing she was likely to say all night. "I met him online." Her face felt warm, and she wished the bartender would hurry the hell up with those Manhattans.

Brad smiled. It was just condescending enough to show that he recognized her embarrassment, and was enjoying it a bit. "You need to be careful who you meet online. They aren't always who they seem

to be."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Thank you, sir," Brad said to the bartender, accepting the two glasses. He passed one to Stacy.

Stacy took a sip, savoring the boozy goodness running into her bloodstream. "Ah, that's the stuff."

"What kind of guy leaves a knockout like you sitting alone at a bar?"

Stacy appreciated the compliment, though she wasn't thrilled about the term 'knockout'. It sounded like something her grandpa would say.

"And at an Olive Garden?" Brad continued. "Sounds like a real class act."

Stacy necked the rest of her drink. No point in being coy. "So says the guy chatting me up at an Olive Garden bar."

Brad took her glass and held it up, nodding at the bartender for another drink. It might have been nice to run it by her first, but hey… free drinks.

"I was just here on business," he said. "You want to keep a client's business, you keep them happy. If that means suffering through some Chef Boyardee ravioli, then so be it."

"And yet you're still here."

"One bar's as good as another."

After a few more Manhattans, Stacy began to warm to Brad's forced wit and bravado. He wasn't a guy she could ever date seriously, but he was good for a few laughs. She was four more drinks – and at least as many "amazing" Brad stories – in, when his well-practiced smile faltered. He was looking at the front door.

"Holy Mary, mother of God. What is *that*?"

The identity of the man standing in the Olive Garden doorway was no enigma to Stacy. He fit Tim's description right down to the purple cape. *He really wore it.* To his credit, he looked like he otherwise tried to make an effort. His hair was washed, and the polo shirt under his cape was stuffed under his gut into a pair of jeans that looked like he hadn't worn since two sizes ago. The poor guy looked as out of place as a kitten in a snake pit.

He clutched an old, black backpack by the straps. The patrons nearest him looked at the bag as if hoping it didn't contain a bomb. It was time for Stacy to step up to the plate.

"Mordred!" she called out, breaking the silence in the room. She gave him a wave and a cheery smile. The booze had been a good idea.

Mordred let out a relieved sigh and waved back.

The other patrons, satisfied that this weirdo was the expected dining companion of a seemingly normal person, and therefore less likely to be taking out his frustrations on a cruel and uncaring world,

continued their conversations.

"You've gotta be kidding me," said Brad. "*You*… and *him*?"

"The heart wants what the heart wants," said Stacy, trying to sound convincing. By Brad's smirk, she could tell he wasn't buying it.

"Well you two lovebirds enjoy your meal," said Brad, setting a business card down on the bar. "Gimme a buzz if the date doesn't go as well as you hoped. Good luck." He winked at her, took what remained of his drink, and moved down to the end of the bar.

Chapter 18

"He's gone," said Katherine. "You can take your hood down."

Cooper lowered his hood. "Thank fuck," he said. "It smells like ass in there."

As there was a big enough gap in the oncoming traffic from either direction, the two of them ran across the highway. Once they were safely hidden in the forested north side, Katherine morphed into her wolf form.

She almost immediately picked up Ginfizzle's scent, which was weird because she hadn't even realized she knew what he smelled like. But the scent was strong and unmistakable. The trail was fresh. She sniffed at the ground as she trotted along, with Cooper crashing through the trees and underbrush behind her.

The scent weakened as Katherine followed it. The scenario played out in her mind. Getting hit by a car had hurt Ginfizzle pretty badly. He'd spilled a lot of blood as he ran away. Then his wounds started to heal, and he dripped less and less blood, until he was completely healed. The blood had made him easy to track, but it wasn't necessary. Faint as it was, she could still keep up with his erratic zig-zagging through the forest… until, suddenly, she couldn't.

The trail ended abruptly. Katherine raised her snout and opened her canine nostrils wide, but all she could smell was Cooper. He'd just farted up a cloud of Arby's and Funyuns. She turned her head toward him and growled as he came into view.

"What?" said Cooper.

Katherine didn't want to waste any time, but she couldn't communicate with Cooper in wolf form. She morphed back into a half elf.

"I lost the trail."

"Oh," said Cooper. "Well, shit."

"Your fart overpowered it."

Cooper looked down. "I guess I can't blame this one on the dog."

"I know it's not your fault," said Katherine. "But I need you to take a walk so I can try to pick him up again."

"Okay."

"I'll howl when I've got him again."

Cooper nodded, and trudged off back in the direction he had come from.

He was sensitive for such a big brute. Katherine guessed there was only so much a guy could take of people telling him over and over again how revolting he is before it started to wear at him. She pushed it out of her mind. Feelings were for the living. Once the fart smell

had dissipated enough, she changed back into a wolf and took a long, deep breath.

It wasn't just Cooper's fart that had made the trail go cold. Even now, in his absence, the trail was dead. Ginfizzle must have turned into a bat and taken flight from here. But why? What did he have to flee? Maybe he wasn't fleeing at all. More likely, he was on the hunt.

Katherine bounded forward another fifty yards in the direction the trail had most recently been pointing toward. It was all she could do. She stopped and sniffed the air again. There it was. His scent was weak, and mingled with that of another creature's blood, but there was no mistaking it. She had him again. She howled into the muggy night air, and then bolted off after her prey.

The scene wasn't hard to spot once she got in visual range. A few trees splattered with blood. An emaciated husk of a deer. It was a big buck, with blood on its antlers. Katherine gave them a sniff. Ginfizzle's blood. The animal had put up a fight, but in the end it was no match for a vampire. Every last drop of its own blood had been sucked right out of it.

Katherine let out two sharp barks to let Cooper know where she was. He was still some distance behind her, but from the sound of crashing foliage, at least he was headed in the right direction. Ginfizzle's scent was strong in the air. He was nearby. She'd find him, but first there was the matter of this deer. It wouldn't do them any good to catch Ginfizzle if they left a vampiric deer on the loose. She tried to crush its skull with her mouth, but it was too big to get a proper grip on. She'd have to bash it against a tree. She changed back into her half-elf form.

"Why do you follow me?" asked a raspy voice from above.

Katherine looked up, and there he was. A scrawny, naked humanoid figure perched high on the branch of a pine tree.

"Ginfizzle!" said Katherine, trying to sound warm and comforting. It felt forced, but it was her only card to play. "I've been looking all over for you. Why did you run off?"

"You threw me through a window."

"Oh, right," said Katherine. "Sorry about that. I was just protecting Butterbean. I couldn't let you eat him."

Ginfizzle snarled. "That wolf cares no more for you than it does for me. We are the damned, cursed to wander in death. We are despised by the living."

"Then it makes sense for us to stick together, doesn't it?" said Katherine. "We're all we've got." If she could get him down from that tree, she could wrestle him down until Cooper arrived with the Bag of Holding.

"I'm doing just fine on my own," said Ginfizzle. He pointed down at

the dead deer. “There, see for yourself.”

“I know you’re strong,” said Katherine. “But what’s going to happen once morning comes? The sunlight will destroy you if you don’t have a place to hide. I know a place where we can go.” The thought only now occurred to her that the situation might have resolved itself if she had just left him alone.

“Where is this place?”

“Back at the restaurant, the place we slept today. My brother will keep us safe. He already bought some rabbits for us to eat.”

“I’d as soon dine on your brother’s flesh as I would his filthy, stinking rabbits. He’ll kill us the first chance he gets.”

“No he won’t,” said Katherine. “Tim may be a whiny little shit sometimes, but he looks out for me. So much so that I often take advantage of him.” She gestured for him to come down. “Come on, Ginny. You’ve got nowhere else to go. Let me take care of you, just through the day. We can help you find a place of your own tomorrow evening.”

Ginfizzle stood up on his branch and clawed nervously at the trunk. “Why do you care what happens to me?”

Katherine hugged herself, feigning a shiver. Her breasts squeezed together. From Ginfizzle’s vantage point, he’d have a nice view of her cleavage. “Eternity is a long time to spend alone.”

Ginfizzle licked his lips as his eyes widened. He didn’t even pretend to not be looking at her rack. He climbed to a lower branch. *It was working.*

“Everyone I’ve ever known and loved,” Katherine continued. “My brother, my friends, my family.” She bent over to pick a wildflower, giving Ginfizzle a healthy view of her dress stretched tight over her ass. She let him stare a couple of seconds before standing up again. Her back was turned to him, a demonstration of trust and vulnerability on her part. She heard him hop down to another lower branch. “All of them will pass, like so many petals of a –”

“Katherine!” shouted Cooper, charging onto the scene, brandishing his newly acquired giant steel revolver. “He’s behind you!”

“Cooper, no!” cried Katherine. She turned to Ginfizzle.

Ginfizzle looked back at her, his eyes betraying a mixture of confusion, fear, and hatred. “Wha—”

As the tranquility of the forest exploded in a single, echoing gunshot blast, so too did Ginfizzle explode into a cloud of billions of tiny red particles, suspended in the humid night air… and all over Katherine’s face.

“Eat my ass, cocksucker!” said Cooper, lowering the weapon.

“You stupid asshole!” Katherine shouted at him. “I had this under control!”

“What?” said Cooper.

Katherine stomped past him, toward the dead deer. “You were supposed to put him in the bag.”

“What difference does it make?” said Cooper.

Katherine picked up the deer by the head and bashed it repeatedly into the trunk of a nearby tree.

“Look,” said Cooper. “I can see you’re upset, but… um… What the fuck are you doing?“

“Damage control,” said Katherine. Satisfied that the deer head was a pulpy mess of brain and crushed bone, she dropped the dead animal on the ground, and gave Cooper a narrow-eyed stare when he bent down to pick it up.

“Meat,” he said, shoving it into the Bag of Holding. He wasn’t a complicated man.

The blood-mist coalesced into larger droplets as they ran down Katherine’s face. It gave her a creepy sensation. Two globs of blood ran down either side of her collarbone, combining into one larger glob at the bottom of her throat. The liquid mass continued down until it came to rest between her breasts. If gravity had been guiding it this far, there was no reason it should have stopped, and yet it did.

“I don’t think he’s dead, Cooper.”

“Huh?” said Cooper, his gaze snapping up from her blood-filled cleavage.

Katherine pinched the blood blob, and found that she was able to pull it off of her skin as one large mass. It had a consistency slightly thicker than the fake slime Tim and Cooper used to chase her around with as kids.

“Ginfizzle,” she said. “He’s alive.” She scanned the upper branches of the surrounding trees. Not spotting any vampires, she raised her voice. “And he’s a fucking creep!” She flung the blob against a nearby pine tree.

The coalescence of blood, instead of running down the trunk, flowed in the opposite direction, running up the tree like gravity in reverse. Katherine watched it climb higher and higher until she spotted Ginfizzle, way up in the top branches of this particularly tall tree.

Ginfizzle stared down at Katherine. “Thank you for your offer to spend eternity with me,” he said. “But I think I’ll hold out for somebody a bit younger.”

That evil little shit.

“Your mother!” Katherine shouted. She jumped onto the tree trunk and started climbing. She was surprised to find that she could scale a tree nearly as fast as she could run on the ground.

Ginfizzle leapt from his branch, turned into a bat, and flapped

away. Katherine got a foothold on a solid branch, sprang into the air, morphed into her bat from, and flapped off after him.

"Ah fuck," said Cooper, jogging after them.

Chapter 19

Tim woke up with a start. His head had smacked against the car window. Through the windshield he could see the entrance to an Olive Garden. *Stacy!* How long had he been out? It couldn't have been more than a couple of seconds… could it? He scanned the parking lot. There was no sign of Mordred's car or Mordred. He opened the door as discreetly as he could and slipped out of Stacy's car.

Staying close to parked cars for cover, Tim ran down each row of the parking lot, searching for the little hatchback with the busted rear windshield. Precisely zero cars in the lot matched that description. The place was pretty packed. It was possible Mordred might have parked over at the neighboring mall. Or maybe he was driving his parents' car or something. He wouldn't want to take his own piece of shit out on a blind date. Or maybe, just maybe, he'd finished whacking off and come to his senses, realizing just how sketchy this whole situation was.

Tim needed to check on Stacy. He scanned the parking lot one more time. Still no Mordred, but who was to say that fat bastard wasn't staking the place out himself? Better to lean toward paranoia. Tim spotted a family of four approaching the restaurant that could just as easily be a family of five. He weaved his way between cars, stepping out into the open in stride with the family, close enough so that an observer would assume they were together, but just far enough away for the family to assume they were all walking to the same place coincidentally at the same time. *Urban stealth. Nice.*

Once inside, Tim ditched his cover family and headed for the bar. A drink would have gone down nicely right about then, but he'd have to wait. The bar was crowded with lonely, balding men with polo shirts tucked into their Dockers. Stacy should have been easy to spot. She wasn't there.

"Hey, sugar. Are you lost?"

Tim jumped and turned around. A chubby, ample-breasted Asian hostess was bent over him.

"Fuck off, lady. I'm looking for someone."

The hostess stood up. Her face suggested that she would no longer be calling Tim 'sugar'. Stacy was right. He was kind of an asshole.

"No one under twenty-one is allowed in the bar area."

"I'm sorry," said Tim, shuffling uncomfortably into the dining area under the hostess's burning glare. Where the hell was Stacy? Had he slept that long? Had Mordred already come and taken her away? He felt his heartbeat start to quicken.

Doing his best to stay out of sight, Tim ducked around corners and

behind decorative wine barrels as he searched the restaurant, section by section. It was slow going, and he picked up more than a couple of stares from customers who thankfully weren't Mordred. He needed a better vantage point.

Leaning back against a waiter station, Tim found exactly what he needed. A recently abandoned booth next to a partition. The tablecloth would offer him cover as he searched one section, and then he'd be able to hop onto the seat and peek over the partition to search an even bigger section. He grabbed a menu and held it up as if he was reading it.

Tim took a deep breath. Now or never. Staying hidden behind the menu, he made a break for his strategically located table, right into the path of an approaching waiter.

"Jesus, kid!" said the waiter, stumbling over Tim and only barely managing to hold on to his tray. "Watch where you're going."

"Sorry!" Tim squeaked without looking away from the menu. His stealth was failing him. He was making a spectacle of himself. He hurried under the table and peeked out from behind the table cloth. The opposite row of booths were all occupied, but none of them with Mordred or Stacy. Even better, nobody was looking back at him.

Tim's stomach grumbled. Arby's had been some time ago, and the food in here actually smelled pretty good. He reached up and pawed around until his hand found something soft and moist. He brought it under the table. A half-eaten breadstick. Not being too proud a man, he shoved it into his mouth. Fucking delicious. If memory served, there were still two more untouched breadsticks in a basket. He felt around with his hand. He splattered a bit of marinara and knocked over a wine glass before he finally found the basket.

He'd gobbled down one breadstick and half of another when the tablecloth was pulled back.

"Can I help you?" It was the waiter Tim had nearly tripped. His tone suggested that he didn't intend to be very helpful at all.

"I dropped a contact lens," said Tim through a mouthful of bread.

"Wait right here," said the waiter. He walked off toward the front of the restaurant. "Maggie, there's some kid stealing food from off the tables in section five. He looks homeless."

"I know exactly who you're talking about!" said a voice that Tim recognized. "Do you know what that little prick *said* to me?"

Fuck.

Tim dashed out from under the table to the far end of the double-row of booths. He got quite a few more stares than he was comfortable with, but at least none of them were –

Mordred!

He and Stacy were at a little table next to a window. Tim reflected

that it might have been a better idea to peek in the windows before actually entering the restaurant. Thankfully, Mordred's back was to him, but Stacy looked right at him. Her eyes went wide and she choked on her drink.

Mordred started to turn, presumably wondering what had just spooked Stacy so badly. Tim dove behind a wine barrel.

"Are you okay?" asked Mordred.

"Yeah, I'm fine," said Stacy, catching her breath. "I just choked on my drink. You said something really funny… about AIDS?"

What the fuck?

"IEDs," said Mordred. "Improvised explosive devices."

"That's the one."

"Right!" said Mordred. "So the party spent about thirty minutes checking for traps on the door, but what they didn't know was that the bandits had rigged up little mines all over the dungeon floor!"

"Those stupid fuckers!" Stacy's laughter was obnoxiously loud, like a horse being tickled. Strangely enough, it seemed genuine. How much had she had to drink?

Mordred laughed like an asthmatic pig. "I'm so happy you came and met me here. I'm really having a nice time."

"Me, too," said Stacy. Again, she sounded troublingly sincere. Tim felt little pangs of what might have been jealousy nibble at his insides. Or maybe he was just still hungry.

"If you'll excuse me," said Mordred. "I need to use the restroom."

Perfect.

"Wait!" said Stacy, a hint of panic in her voice. "Before you go, answer a question for me, would you?"

"Of course!"

"What's your favorite C&C race?"

What the fuck kind of question was that? Why wouldn't she just let him go for a piss so that Tim could get the hell out of there? It was almost as if she was intentionally… Tim looked up at the wall behind him. Right next to him was a door which read "MEN".

Shit.

Tim needed a distraction. There was too much ground to cover between himself and the front entrance. Mordred would spot him for sure if he got up.

The waiter whose path Tim had crossed a few minutes ago was approaching Mordred and Stacy's table with a large tray. Tim grabbed a pepper shaker from off the top of the wine barrel and unscrewed the lid until it was almost completely off.

"I've always been partial to elves," said Mordred. "They're a reflection of how I see myself. Proud, strong, and noble, yet gentle enough to –"

Tim stood up and hurled the pepper shaker as hard as he could, hitting the waiter square in the temple.

“Wha!” said the waiter. The tray, along with Mordred and Stacy’s dinner, crashed to the floor. The three of them were engulfed in a cloud of pepper.

“Oh my God!” cried Stacy. “It’s in my eyes!”

“I can’t see!” cried Mordred.

With the entire restaurant focused on them, Tim walked casually to the front of the restaurant and out the door.

“IED,” he said to himself. “Thanks for the idea, Mordred.”

Chapter 20

Katherine flapped as hard as she could, but she wasn't gaining on Ginfizzle at all. He swooped around trees, and over and under branches, constantly and haphazardly changing directions. It was all Katherine could do just to keep up. Both of them, however, were getting farther and farther away from Cooper. The sound of him crashing through the forest behind them had faded away to nothing.

There was no point in catching Ginfizzle if Cooper wasn't there to bag him. All they'd be able to do is beat the shit out of one another until they both needed to feed again. In her as yet brief experience as a vampire, Katherine wasn't fully aware of all of her own weaknesses. In the event that Ginfizzle, being from a place where vampires exist, should be more knowledgeable about such things, Katherine felt safer with Cooper to back her up.

"Fuck you!" she tried to shout at Ginfizzle, but it only came out as a high-pitched squeal, giving her a sharp mental image of the surrounding pine trees. She turned around to go and find Cooper.

She was fortunate she discontinued the chase when she did. When she finally found Cooper, he had slowed down to a jog, but was headed in the wrong direction. Stupid as he was, he couldn't be faulted for this one. As much as Ginfizzle had been twisting and turning, it was a wonder that Katherine was able to find Cooper at all. She swooped down to meet him.

When Cooper saw her, he cocked back a fist.

Huh? Katherine hovered a safe distance out of Cooper's punching range.

"Which one are you?" he panted out.

Oh, right.

Katherine changed into her half-elf form. Cooper collapsed face-first into the dirt and farted like a deflating balloon.

"Come on, Cooper," said Katherine. "We can't give up now. He's hurt, and we're right on top of him!"

"I'm fucking exhausted," said Cooper. "I haven't slept in like two days." He closed his eyes. "I… can't… run… one… more… single… fucking… step." He looked as though he was forcing himself to stay awake long enough to finish the sentence.

"Then I'll carry you."

Cooper grunted out a hollow laugh and opened one eye. "How are you going to fight a vampire with a sleeping half-orc in your arms?"

"Who said anything about using my arms?" Katherine decided it was time to try out a new form. She'd seen Millard do it, so she knew she had the power inside her. She focused her mind. Like a bat, only

bigger.

Instead of shrinking as her body changed, this time she grew. She could feel the muscles and bones stretch thin as her arms elongated. Her fingers grew at twice the speed, stretching the skin between them into great webbed wings. Her thumbs didn't grow, but their nails grew into thick, hooked claws. Coarse bristles of black fur burst out of every pore of her skin.

When the transformation was done, Katherine stood uncomfortably on feet that weren't made for standing. She looked down at Cooper. He looked so little now. She let out a roaring screech, like a lion going through puberty. Compared to her normal bat form, the mental picture echolocating in her mind right now was positively HiDef.

Cooper opened his eyes and looked at her. He sat bolt upright. "Jesus, I'm awake! No, wait… am I awake?" He slapped himself repeatedly in the face. "Wake up, God damn you! Wake up!"

Katherine flapped her enormous, black wings, lifting herself off the ground and creating a cloud of dirt and fallen leaves. She hovered over Cooper and opened her giant, clawed feet.

Cooper stood up. "Katherine?"

Katherine screeched again, making a token effort to try not to be terrifying. From the look on Cooper's face, she hadn't succeeded.

"I think I've got a second wind," said Cooper, starting to jog.

They didn't have time to goof around. Katherine swooped down and grabbed Cooper by the shoulders. Flapping with all of her supernatural might, shaking the surrounding trees, she lifted Cooper off of the ground. Once she knew it was possible, it became easier. She climbed through the air and erupted out of the treetops.

"FUCK YES!" said Cooper, who had obviously reconsidered his feelings about being grabbed by a giant bat.

Katherine beat her wings harder, climbing farther up into the night, until the area below her resembled a map. The air was thinner up here, which meant she had to flap harder, but it was also refreshingly cooler, which was worth some extra flapping. The lights in the distance to her right would be Biloxi. She could even recognize a few of the casinos from here. Straight ahead of her was D'Iberville, as evidenced by Target, Dick's Sporting Goods, and the Olive Garden.

She looked down to try to pinpoint where she had broken off her chase with Ginfizzle. It was hard to say. Down below was nothing but trees. She made her best guess and flew down for a closer look. The tree cover was thick, but broken frequently enough by creeks, country roads, and developed property, that Ginfizzle should have been easy enough to spot soon enough.

"There!" said Cooper, pointing his big gun down at a seemingly innocuous patch of forest. A little farther along, a dog raced across a

road like it had just seen the devil himself. It was just an ordinary black lab. As far as she knew, vampires didn't have the ability to turn into domestic breeds of dog, and this one was too small to be a – And then she saw it. The biggest wolf she'd ever seen in her life exploded out from the trees, not even touching the road as it bounded across in one stride and grabbed the lab by the back like a golden retriever might grab a duck. It was a monster of a wolf. Katherine guessed it was even bigger than a horse. She'd have to remember this for her own repertoire.

The lab gave a brief cry of pain before the giant wolf clamped its jaws together and shook its head. Katherine plunged down while the wolf lapped up the dead dog's blood. It would be a challenge to stuff an animal this big into the Bag of Holding, but if they could get close enough without being detected, well… they'd cross that bridge when they came to it.

A gunshot rang out. Bark exploded off the trunk of a pine tree about ten feet away from the wolf.

Goddammit, Cooper.

The startled wolf looked up at them, teeth bared and muzzle covered in blood.

Katherine, unable to reprimand Cooper the conventional way, let out a frustrated shriek.

"I'm sorry!" said Cooper. "It's hard to aim when you're holding my arms!"

Ginfizzle growled but chose to dart off into the woods again rather than stay and fight.

Katherine descended the rest of the way to the site of the carnage, letting go of Cooper a good ten feet before she touched the ground herself.

"Fuck!" said Cooper as he fell. When he crashed to the ground, the gun went off.

Shit! She had only meant to give him a little payback for being stupid. She hadn't meant to make him shoot himself. She morphed back into a half-elf.

"Cooper! Are you okay?"

Cooper stood up and patted himself down. "It's okay," he said. "I'm not hurt."

Katherine punched him in the face.

"What the fuck was that for!" said Cooper.

"We almost had him!" cried Katherine. "All you had to do was keep quiet for a few more seconds!"

"Well we're still right on his ass," said Cooper. "Why did you stop?"

"Damage control," said Katherine. It was only a half truth. She wasn't about to let the rest of that fresh, warm blood go to waste. She

got down on her hands and knees and sucked on one of the gaping wounds Ginfizzle had left in the dog, gulping down the hot, salty liquid. When she'd had her fill, she picked the dog up and smashed its head into the tree Cooper had shot. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, then licked the blood off like a cat cleaning herself.

She turned to Cooper. "Ready?"

Cooper stared back at her, dead-eyed and open-mouthed. If she didn't know any better, Katherine would have sworn the gun stuffed down the front of his pants had two barrels.

"You keep that in your pants, understand?" said Katherine.

Cooper nodded. It was hard to make out in the dark, but she thought he might have been blushing. *Fucking weirdo.* She turned into a giant bat again, picked up Cooper, and continued the chase.

Ginfizzle wasn't hard to spot now that Katherine knew what she was looking for and had narrowed his location down a more specific area. She followed a path of shaking trees, barking dogs, and the occasional human scream. He was running faster than she could fly. If it came down to it, she could ditch Cooper and take on the form of a big wolf herself, but she hoped that, if she could chase him out onto Promenade Parkway, he might get hit by a truck or something.

No such luck. Ginfizzle had obviously learned his lesson about traffic safety when he got hit by a car earlier that evening. He stopped just short of the busy four lane road. The two deer which were running away from him weren't so road savvy.

An SUV, no doubt distracted by the massive wolf running out of the forest, didn't even try to brake before plowing right into one of the deer. The other deer was narrowly missed by a red pick-up truck, which swerved across the center line into oncoming traffic. Tires screeched. Cars on both sides of the parkway crashed into one another, but with a twenty-five mile-per-hour speed limit, Katherine guessed that everyone but that first deer would be walking away. Ginfizzle jumped on top of the stopped cars as he crossed over into the Dick's Sporting Goods parking lot.

Most of the motorists were too shocked to scream. They merely pointed and stared at the giant wolf running rampant through their city. They managed to find their voices, however, when Katherine and Cooper flew past them. Their screams screwed with her echolocation, and she began to get disoriented.

"Take that, you hairy son of a bitch!" shouted Cooper, firing off three shots as Katherine lost control of where she was flying. They crashed into a lamp post and fell to the hard, unforgiving concrete.

Katherine took on her half-elven form and stood up. Judging by the darkened Olive Garden sign raining down a shower of sparks across the street and the blaring car alarm in the Dick's Sporting Goods

parking lot, she guessed she could account for at least two of Cooper's shots.

"What the fuck just happened?" said Cooper. "Did you get high on that dog blood?"

Katherine lifted Cooper off the ground by the throat and slammed him into the side of a parked van. Her voice shook as she spoke. "I just want to rip your stupid face off!"

"Wha?" Cooper croaked through his collapsing trachea.

Katherine let him go and snatched the gun out of his hand. She waved it in his face. "I thought I told you to keep this in your pants!"

Cooper took a few deep breaths. "Oh," he laughed shallowly. "You meant the gun."

"Are you fucking retarded!" shouted Katherine. She threw the gun through the windshield of a nearby car. "WHAT THE FUCK ELSE WOULD I MEAN?"

"I thought you meant… um… Hey, where's Jizzfiddle?"

A series of screams came out of the sporting goods store. Katherine looked in that direction. Two soccer moms were sitting on the pavement outside the store next to their overturned shopping bags, like they had just been pushed over.

Katherine and Cooper looked at each other. "Dick's!"

Chapter 21

Stacy, Mordred, and their waiter, Josh, spent a few minutes hacking and coughing until the pepper cloud began to dissipate.

"I'm so, so sorry!" said Josh, rubbing the side of his head. "Some homeless kid's got it in for me tonight."

"Homeless kid?" said Mordred.

Stacy didn't like the doubt in Mordred's voice. She thought it best to corroborate the waiter's story. "Oh yeah," she said. "I saw this on the news. It's a new trend. The little street urchins are storming into restaurants, stealing food, and assaulting the wait staff."

"Why?" asked Josh. His eyes were watery, making the question sound like he was genuinely distraught about the plight of suburban family restaurants. But it was probably just the pepper lingering in his eyes.

Stacy shrugged. "Dunno. Something about the one percent?"

"But I'm just a –"

"Would you mind getting me another drink?" said Stacy. Mine's got a layer of pepper on top.

"Yes, ma'am," said Josh. "And I'll put your order in again and be right back to clean up the mess."

Stacy gave him a friendly, tight-lipped smile and a wink. Her own eyes still stung pretty bad.

"I'm going to head to the bathroom now," said Mordred. "Maybe rinse my eyes out."

Stacy didn't know how long her next drink was going to be, so she tried to skim the pepper off the top of her current one. She had actually been having a good time before Tim showed up. Sure, Mordred was a big dork, but there was something adorable about how passionate he was about his little game.

What the hell had Tim come inside the restaurant for? He was supposed to be covering the entrance. The little control freak probably didn't trust her not to screw this up. She would laugh at the irony of that later, when her eyes weren't full of pepper.

To be fair though, Tim's shenanigans had been entertaining as well, but Stacy was hungry, and determined not to fill up on breadsticks and salad. She scowled down at her chicken parmesan on the floor. Her stomach grumbled. The food smelled better than she would have liked to admit.

She eyed a piece of chicken resting atop another piece of chicken, and therefore technically not touching the floor. She was strongly considering reaching a new low in her life when she heard the screech of tires outside. She looked out the window. Cars were crashing into

each other on Promenade Parkway. She was about to write it off as drunks when she noticed a giant, gray wolf lurking in the shadows on the other side of the road. The thing was bigger than her apartment. It could only mean one thing. More of her new friends were close by.

Diners at nearby tables gasped.

"Look at that!"

"What is it?"

"Quick, get your camera!"

The wolf crossed the street on top of the cars. A few seconds later, a huge bat flew after the wolf, carrying a guy in a Papa Joe's uniform. He looked like the big one… Connor, was it? Whatever his name was, he was waving around a big Dirty Harry gun. Stacy wondered if she'd lost her ability to be surprised.

"What's all the commotion?"

Stacy jumped and turned away from the window. Mordred was rubbing his eyes and being careful not to step in any of the spilled food on his way back to their table.

Stacy stood up, positioning herself between him and the window. "Oh nothing," she said. "Just a little traffic accident outside. Nothing to –"

A series of loud, booming gunshots rang out. The lights in the restaurant dimmed as the crackle of electricity rained down a shower of sparks outside the front windows.

Those patrons who had been pressing against the windows trying to snap a picture with their cell phones now dove onto the floor. Stacy and Mordred squatted down over their spilled dinner.

Stacy felt a strong urge to abort her mission. She couldn't keep Mordred from hearing about the chaos going on outside, and he was bound to suspect that the timing of their date and said chaos was more than just a coincidence.

"I need to use the bathroom," she said.

Mordred gave her a strange look but nodded silently. The wheels were already turning.

Stacy stood but remained stooping as she walked to the ladies room, taking what cover she could from any more potential errant bullets. Her gut told her to run for the exit and put all of this behind her, but her brain reminded her that there was a huge fucking wolf out there.

She ducked into the ladies room and frowned at her disheveled, flushed reflection in the mirror. *Calm down, Stacy. Think.* She fumbled through her purse for her pack of stale Virginia Slims. Her hands shook as she flicked the lighter. Just as she got a flame going, one of the stalls opened, scaring the shit out of her.

"Sorry," Stacy said to the large, middle-aged woman stepping out of

the stall. “Just a little jumpy.” She got another flame going and lit her cigarette.

The woman frowned at her. “You can’t smoke in here.”

Stacy narrowed her eyes and exhaled a prolonged plume of smoke from her pursed lips. “Go and call the cops, lady. Good luck with that. I’m sure they’re not busy right now.”

The bathroom door swung open. Mordred stood in the doorway.

“Stacy!”

Shit.

“I’m getting the manager,” said the angry woman, shoving her way past Mordred.

“Mordred,” said Stacy taking stock of her immediate surroundings, looking for something she might be able to defend herself with. The best she could come up with was a toilet paper roll poking out of the top of the garbage can. She held on to her cigarette. “This is the ladies’ bathroom. You can’t be in here.”

Mordred locked the door and turned around. His eyes were red, and his cheeks streaked with tears running into his beard. He looked worse than the pepper should have accounted for.

“Did you bring them here?”

“Who?”

“Don’t play with me,” said Mordred. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “I’m not stupid. The whole Olive Garden is talking about giant bats and wolves, and some kind of monster waving a gun. Does any of that sound familiar to you?”

Stacy couldn’t get a fix on his tone. Was he angry? Heartbroken? Scared? Maybe all three. Under his gut she noticed a bulge in his pants. It might have been an unfortunately placed roll of fat, but then again…

“You need to go right now, Mordred!” said Stacy. She tried to sound threatening, but her heart was racing, and her only meager defense was turning quickly into ash.

“I’ll go,” said Mordred. “Just as soon as I give you something to remember me by.”

Chapter 22

Dave felt the relief of a cool breeze on his face and opened his eyes.

He was standing on a sunbaked yellow sandstone balcony overlooking a river in the distance. The air smelled of honeysuckle. The wall in front of him was warm to the touch as he stood on tiptoes to look down at what was immediately below him.

The balcony stood about ten feet off the ground. Down below was a large rectangular pit, a quarter of the way filled with water. On all four corners lay gleaming steel pitchers pouring endless streams of water into the pit.

"How do you like the pool?" said a voice from behind. Dave turned around.

The Horseman who called himself War was standing in the doorway of a gorgeous villa. He looked like a porn mogul from the seventies. A white, linen robe hung open from his shoulders, showing off his tanned chest and surprisingly well-sculpted abs. He wore a thick-chained golden amulet around his neck. His fingers were all decked out with rings, most of them boasting gaudy gemstones of every color. One ring on each hand was more tasteful and simple, which probably meant they were magical. He was holding a glass full of some Windex-blue liquid, which actually had ice cubes in it. He joined Dave at the wall.

"I put it in yesterday," he said, not having to stretch to look over the wall like Dave did. "It's taking forever to fill, though. Even with four Decanters of Endless Water, and those don't come cheap, you know."

"You put in a swimming pool yesterday?" said Dave. "Do you mean you *finished* yesterday?"

"Nope," said War. "Whole project, start to finish, just one day. It's amazing how easy construction projects are with a little higher-level magic. I almost can't wait to get back home and build me one of these on the beach." He took a sip of his drink. "I'm telling you, man. I'm gonna be neck-deep in pussy."

"That would have to be an extremely large pussy," said Dave. *Heh heh, not too shabby.*

"I'll park my Hummer in your mom's."

Goddammit.

"Ha ha!" said War, snapping his fingers. He pointed at Dave. "Feel the burn!" An orange jet of flame shot out of his fingertip. Dave didn't have time to jump out of the way, but he didn't feel anything as the fire passed right through him, leaving a black smoking hole in the sandstone wall behind him.

“Oops,” said War. “I’ll patch that up later.”

“Any idea on when you’ll be heading back home?” asked Dave, trying to make it sound casual and disinterested.

War smirked. “Wouldn’t you like to know. Truth is, I have no idea. Mordred’s been pretty antsy about you fags chasing him all over the gulf coast, but we convinced him to let us hang out here for a few more sessions. Power up a little more. The other guys are out killing a nest of dragons right now.”

“Why aren’t you with them?”

“They asked me to sit this one out. They were getting pissed at me for disintegrating everything before they had a chance to fight. So I stayed home and built a pool instead. To tell you the truth, killing monsters is starting to get a little boring.”

Dave looked up at the villa. “It must pay well, though, huh?”

War swigged back what was left of his drink. “You don’t know the half of it, dude. Come on inside. I want to show you something.” He walked through the doorway.

Dave followed. The interior wasn’t very well furnished. It was obvious that someone had recently moved in. Sacks of coins were piled up in corners. Jewel encrusted goblets lay on the floor like discarded junk. The one major piece of furniture in what Dave guessed was meant to be the living room was a giant, solid oak rectangular dining table, lying on its side against a wall. It had three daggers embedded in it, as well as a large throwing axe. The surface was scarred with countless gouges, burns, and scratches, as was the wall behind it. Dave had some idea of what kind of pursuits these guys got up to when they were drunk and bored at night.

“We bought this place off a retired merchant for the price of ‘We promise not to kill your family’,” said War, kicking a gold-plated helmet out of the way as he walked to the next room. “Most of this crap is useless. We don’t need but one or two weapons a piece when we go back. We’ll stuff as much gold as we can into Bags of Holding, but we’ll probably burn this place to the ground just before we leave, because of course we will.”

Dave followed War through an archway into another room. “Why do you always choose me?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Why don’t you visit any of the other guys in their dreams? Why only me?”

“I don’t know,” said War. “I like you. Maybe it’s because you suck the most, and you don’t say a whole lot. Besides, whenever I’m looking to enter your dreams, you’re the only one that’s ever asleep.”

The room they had entered, while cluttered, appeared to have more of a defined purpose than the one they had just left. This was their

arsenal. Weapons of various types and qualities were strewn about all over the place. Daggers, short swords, and clubs were discarded on the floor, while more powerful weapons were mounted on the walls. Greataxes, broadswords, ornately decorated halberds, and even a gorgeous dwarven urgrosh, which Dave was surprised he was able to identify as such.

"Are these all magical?" said Dave, peering into a barrel full of katanas.

"You bet your ass they are," said War. "Those in the barrel are all vorpal swords. With a good roll, they'll slice a guy in half. Famine dual wields them. You should have seen him fighting this mountain giant a few days ago. It was like he was chopping up a cucumber for a salad. It was sick! But come on over here. This is what I wanted to show you."

Dave walked over to see what War was bending over. A polished wooden case. War lifted the lid and pulled out a gleaming silver mace. It was smaller than the one Dave was accustomed to wielding, but looked a lot more valuable.

"The Rod of Lordly Might," said War, cradling the weapon like a newborn baby. The silver was polished to a mirror-like shine, a tiny, distorted image of the room reflecting off each stud. The near-perfect gleam of the handle was interrupted by six small buttons.

"Impressive," said Dave. His past characters had never lived long enough to wield weapons that powerful.

"This is the weapon I'll be taking back home with me," said War. "So here's my question for you. How do you want to die?"

It was not a question Dave had given much thought to before. "Um…" he said. "Old..*ly*?"

"Let me make the choice simpler for you," said War. "You can go down in a regular old rain of fireballs, *or* you can die by…" He pressed a button on the handle of the mace. A four foot long blade of flame sprang out of the top, like it had been manufactured by the ACME Corporation. "…FIRE SWORD!" The flaming sword whooshed as he waved it through the air. "Yah!" he said, slicing at Dave's incorporeal form.

"Shit!" said Dave, jumping back despite the lack of any real immediate danger. The sword passed through his belly, and he could just imagine his half-raw/half-charred entrails spilling out.

"What do you think about that?" said War, humming lightsaber noises along with the weapon's natural whoosh as he twirled it around awkwardly. His performance was about as impressive as that of the Star Wars Kid on Youtube.

He spun around a few more times than what was good for him, tripped over a war hammer, and fell forward. The flaming blade sliced

into the side of the barrel containing the vorpal swords, leaving behind a charred gash and tipping the barrel over. Vorpal swords clattered onto the floor.

Dave clapped. “Very nice. Can you do that again?”

War stood up, laughing at himself. “The Rod has other functions too,” he said, pointing to the buttons on the handle. “The battleaxe and spear options are actually more powerful weapons, but come on… FIRE SWORD!”

He held the weapon like a guitar with one hand, windmilling his other arm like he was performing the climax of a heavy metal song against a backdrop of pyrotechnics. “FIRE SWORD! FIRE SWORD!” he sang. “You better think of something fast! I’m gonna cauterize your – AAAHHHH!”

That last bit was almost certainly not part of the song. Dave looked at the window War was screaming at just in time to see the gaping maw of a dragon fly through it. The dragon had white scales and pink eyes. If Dave imagined its horns as floppy ears, it almost reminded him of Little Ron Jeremy. It had three rows of sharp, pointed teeth of varying lengths, suggesting that it fed primarily on a diet of children’s nightmares. It might not have been quite big enough to swallow a man whole, but the second bite would surely leave the creature hungry. Dave reined in control of his fear by reminding himself that he wasn’t actually there.

War shrieked and made a desperate swipe at the creature’s snout. The sword sizzled into the dragon’s flesh as white smoke hissed away from a black wound.

“Hey! Knock it off, stupid!” said a gruff, angry voice from outside.

The unresponsive dragon head continued into the room, followed by about three feet of dragon neck, and then the rest of the Horsemen on a flying carpet, and finally by four more feet of white scaly neck, which began to widen just before the sever point.

“What did you expect?” asked War. “You scared the crap out of me!”

The whole house shook when Pestilence hopped off the rug. He was even bigger than before, stuffed into a gleaming suit of spiked armor that made Dave’s look like a rusty tin can. War backed away as Pestilence stomped around the carpet to inspect the dragon’s face.

“Damn it, Scott!”

“Call me *War*.” War whispered, one eye on Dave.

“Screw you, Scott,” said Pestilence. “I was going to bring this back home and have it mounted. Look what you’ve done to it!”

“It looks better this way,” said Death, running a bony white finger along the length of the wound. Where his finger touched, he left a trail of scar tissue, closing the wound, but leaving a gross

disfigurement. This lets observers know that the prize was won by means of fierce battle."

"Hmph," said Famine. "Yeah, real fierce. Pestilence walked up next to it while it was sleeping and hacked its head off… *again*."

"Sorry," said Pestilence. "I got carried away. I'll let you get the next one."

"That's not the point," said Famine. "Aren't you guys getting kind of bored walking into the lairs of huge monsters and killing them in their sleep?"

"What are you whining about?" asked War. "Think of the Experience Points, and all the cool stuff we're getting." He waved his flaming blade around in the air. "FIRE SWORD!"

"Screw the Experience Points," said Famine, drawing one of his twin vorpal swords from its sheath on his back. It was only slightly thinner than his arm. He looked like a marionette as he admired its construction, balancing the blade atop one slender finger, just above the hilt. "I want a real fight. I want to put all these Skills and Feats I've acquired to the test."

Quick as a flash, Famine gripped his vorpal sword, spun around, and sliced Dave diagonally in half.

"Yah!" Dave yelped as the blade passed harmlessly through him. The polished, wooden column he had been standing next to remained upright, but upon close inspection, Dave could see a hairline imperfection where the blade had sliced it in two.

"Mordred has a greater purpose for us," said Death. "He cannot risk our accidental death. We are beholden to his will."

"*We are beholden to his will*?" said Famine. "Who talks like that? Who do you think you are?"

"I am Death."

"Bullcrap you are, Nathan," said Famine. "Your creepy vibe doesn't work on me. You've copied my homework. Anyway, what's this *greater purpose*? Babysitting?"

Both Dave and War looked back at the flying carpet. There was still one more person, dressed in black and bound with rope. A bag obscured the person's face.

War pushed a button on his weapon, retracting the fiery blade. "Who's that?" he said over the distant ring of a telephone.

"Some chick we found wandering around on the mountain," said Pestilence. "Mordred says we're supposed to keep her safe and keep our hands off her." He sneered, picking the figure up and setting it down unceremoniously in a corner. He pulled the bag off, revealing a female human face with large, frightened green eyes, tracks of tears down the sides of both cheeks, and a thick gag of rope and fabric bunched into her mouth.

Dave shook his head, trying to concentrate as the nagging sound of a ringing phone grew less and less distant. For a fraction of a second, it seemed like her eyes locked with his. They were pleading and desperate, and oddly familiar.

The persistent telephone finally won out, and Dave peeled his face from the sticky surface of the table to find himself alone in the Chicken Hut. He wandered groggily to the back office and answered the phone.

"Hello? Er… I mean Chicken Hut. How can I help you?" He had no intention of helping anyone with any chicken related business.

"Dave!" said a panicky, high-pitched voice on the other end. "It's me, Tim. We lost Stacy."

"Huh?"

"I think she left with Mordred, but we lost track of his car. I need you to get Goosewaddle over here and see if he's got any spells that will help us find them."

"What?" said Dave. None of what Tim said made any sense to him. What the hell had they all gotten up to while he was sleeping. "Where are you?"

"We're at the Olive Garden in D'Iberville," said Tim. "Hurry up!"

"Wha… Olive Garden?"

"I don't have time to explain!" said Tim. "Just get over here! Mordred's got Stacy!"

A pair of scared green eyes flashed in Dave's memory. The rest of her bore at most a passing resemblance. Her hair was darker and straighter. Her nose was a little thinner. But her eyes were unmistakable.

"Tim," said Dave. "Mordred's got Stacy, but she's not in his car."

Chapter 23

Cooper pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head as he followed Katherine across the parking lot toward Dick's Sporting Goods. He didn't pull the drawstring. Some cover was better than none, but he still needed to see. A couple of the shopping center groundskeepers gave him a cautious glance as they blew leaves and debris from the most recent summer storm into piles, but none of them ran away screaming or attacked him with their leaf blowers. That was as good a reaction as he could hope for.

The inside of Dick's was alive with gossip and rumor.

"Now I don't mean to be insensitive or nothin'," one overweight goateed man said to another. "But if you got a kid with mental problems that severe, you need to keep that kid locked up."

"I couldn't agree more," said the second man. "Kids like that pose a danger to themselves and others. It's just plain irresponsible to –" He wrinkled his nose. "Do you smell somethin'?"

Katherine pulled Cooper's drawstring tight as they approached the two men. "Excuse me," she said, taking advantage of the interruption of their conversation. "Did a naked, retarded boy just run past here?"

"Yes ma'am, he did."

"Which way did he go?" Katherine's voice was demanding and impatient. "He, umm… he needs his insulin, or he'll really start to freak out."

"He ran over there past the Menswear department and turned left, back toward Hunting and Fishing."

"Shit," said Katherine.

Cooper maneuvered his head until his lips lined up with the tiny opening in the front of his hood. "Do you think he knows how to use a gun?"

"Let's not give him a chance to learn," said Katherine. "Come on!"

"Sounds like we'd best skidaddle," said one of the men.

Cooper pulled down his hood to see which way Katherine had gone.

"Jesus!" said the other man. They shoved one another, each trying to be the first to get out the front doors.

"Cooper!" shouted Katherine.

Cooper turned around and spotted her near a rack of New Orleans Saints football jerseys. Once he started running toward her, she continued on her way. As soon a she cleared the Menswear department, a gunshot echoed through the warehouse-like store.

Shoppers screamed and panicked, running this way and that, as Katherine stumbled back behind the cover of the football jerseys. When Cooper caught up to her, she was clutching a wound just under

her left breast.

"Shit! Katherine!" said Cooper, kneeling next to her. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine," Katherine said through gritted teeth. "I just need a few seconds to regenerate."

Cooper growled quietly. "That little fucker learns fast."

"It wasn't him," said Katherine. She licked the blood off of her hand and frowned at the hole in her dress. "It was a store clerk. Ginny must have Dominated him." She grabbed the sleeve of Cooper's sweatshirt as she stood up on wobbly legs.

"Hey Kat, take it easy."

"I'm fine," said Katherine. She looked across the lane at Children's Sportswear, where a young mother was crying on the floor, huddled protectively over her two kids. "Get the fuck out of here, lady!" After a couple more seconds of the woman's confused crying, Katherine bared her fangs and hissed at her.

The woman didn't need to be told a third time. She grabbed her two kids by the arms and dragged them toward the exit.

"It's touching to see you care so much," said Cooper.

"We need to clear these idiots out of here before someone gets hurt."

"How?"

"I'll take care of that," said Katherine. "I need to cross over to the back of the store. Do you think you can provide some sort of distraction?."

"I'm on it," said Cooper. He grabbed a cardboard cutout of a blonde Saints cheerleader. "Get ready to move."

"Hang on a sec," said Katherine. "I'm going to make myself a smaller target." She morphed into a normal-sized bat.

"Ready?" said Cooper. Katherine nodded her little bat head once. "Okay, go!"

Cooper peeked the head of the cardboard cheerleader out from behind the cover of the football jerseys. Another shot fired out. The top of the cheerleaders head flew off. Hopefully that had bought Katherine the time she needed.

"That's her!" cried the voice of the little pain-in-the-ass halfling vampire. "The bat! Shoot it! Shoot it!"

Another shot fired, and an overhead lamp exploded, raining down sparks and shattered glass. But Katherine made it to the other side of the lane and out of the gunner's line of fire.

Cooper breathed a relieved sigh and wondered briefly what Katherine needed at the back of the store. Then he stared at the football jerseys, frustrated that he couldn't read the players' names or numbers. *Illiteracy sucks.*

An idea popped into Cooper's head. He grabbed the biggest jersey he could find off the rack, and backtracked toward the front of the store. He turned right just before reaching the checkout stations, looking for the sports equipment.

As he ran, he couldn't believe how many people were still hanging around. Most of the customers and staff had evacuated, though a lot of them were crowded against the front window, peering inside. But there were still a surprising number of people inside, just hanging around. Maybe they were too scared, too stupid, or too curious to move. Cooper ran past them. He stopped running when he saw a display of footballs. He walked down that aisle, scanning the shelves for football pads. He tore open a few boxes that looked promising, and eventually found shoulder pads, a back plate, a breast plate, elbow pads, knee pads, shin guards, a cup, a jockstrap, and of course, a Saints helmet. None of this would stop a bullet, but maybe it would slow one down, or deflect it, or maybe just provide a little Armor Class bonus. At the very least, it might keep that little fucker's teeth out of his flesh for a minute or two.

"Are you homeless?" said a little boy without much self-preservation instinct. Cooper looked down at him. He guessed the kid was about ten years old.

"You better get lost, kid, if you ever want to sleep again," said Cooper, still trying to keep his face as obscured as possible while still being able to see what he was doing. He faced away from the kid and pulled off his sweatshirt and tried on the shoulder pads. They were a little small, but they'd do.

"My dad says most of you guys are fakers, driving around in BMW's after you spend all day harassing people for change," said the kid. "But you look like the real deal to me."

"Thanks," said Cooper.

"What's wrong with your ears?"

"Vitamin deficiency," said Cooper. "I didn't eat my vegetables when I was younger. Now beat it!" He put on the helmet, suddenly feeling sensitive about his orcish, misshapen ears.

Cooper peeked back to make sure the boy had gone. He had. Thank fuck. He pulled down his pants and sorted through the torn cardboard boxes, looking to see where he'd placed the cup and jockstrap.

"Where you been, Donny?" said a man in the next aisle. "I been lookin' all over for you. It ain't safe here."

"I was talking to this homeless guy," said the boy. "He took off his clothes and told me to beat it."

"He said WHAT?"

Oh shit. He'd wanted to say 'Fuck off', but deliberately chose not to swear at a ten year old kid.

As Cooper struggled to remove his pants from around his huge half-orc feet, he heard the unmistakable sound of aluminum baseball bats clanging and sliding against one another, as if one was being pulled from a pile.

When the crazy, angry redneck stepped into his aisle, Cooper was naked except for his head, shoulders and ankles. He was grateful that he didn't have an erection.

"Jesus Christ Almighty!" said Donny's father, staring down at Cooper's bumpy, scabby junk. He turned toward his kid, who was out of Cooper's field of vision. "Donny, did you touch this man's wiener?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Now stay there." He turned to Cooper, slapping the business end of the bat into his open palm. "I'm gonna teach you the meaning of 'beat it'."

"This looks worse than it is," said Cooper, standing up awkwardly, still trapped by his khakis.

Donny's father took slow, deliberate steps toward him. "It's about to look even worse, you sick sack of sh—" He paused, his expression changing from rage to bewilderment.

"Shit?" suggested Cooper.

"Just how many kids do you molest in a given day?"

"What the fuck kind of question is –
AAAAAUUUUUURRRRRGGGGHHHH!"

A powerful set of razor-sharp teeth clamped onto Cooper's right ass cheek. Pain seared through his entire backside. He lost control of his sphincter muscle and sprayed his assailant with a thick, chocolate coating.

Ginfizzle released his toothy grip on Cooper's ass. Cooper looked back. The little vampire was covered from the neck down in yellow-brown, liquid shit.

"I… never…" Ginfizzle stammered.

Cooper snorted. "You literally bit the shit out of – OW!" Cold aluminum cracked into the right side of Cooper's ribs. He turned just in time to avoid a second blow, caught the bat with his hand, and ripped it out of the angry father's grasp.

Cooper raised the bat over his head, but Ginfizzle snapped out of his shit-induced shock just in time to disintegrate into a pink mist before Cooper could connect with his head. The bat passed harmlessly through the mist and struck the floor hard, sending vibrations up through Cooper's arms.

The mist flowed out of the football equipment aisle and turned left.

Cooper grabbed Donny's father by the shirt and pulled him close so that he could get a good look at his pissed-off half-orc face. "Don't make me kick your ass in front of your kid. Do you understand?"

Donny's father shut his eyes and turned away. "Dear Lord, is that… Funyuns?"

Cooper gave him a good shake. "Listen, man! I'm not fucking around. Some heavy shit is going down right now. It's not safe for you and your –"

"You would hurt my master!" said a voice from Womenswear.

Cooper looked back. A bald man in a Dick's uniform, sporting a Mr. Kotter mustache and a belt like the equator, was pointing a rifle at him. Two rats were scurrying toward him from behind. *That's weird.*

Screams broke out from all areas of the store at once. Mostly women, but a few men as well.

"Fuck," said Cooper, releasing Donny's father. "Run!"

Donny's father took off. Cooper tried to run after him, but his pants were still wrapped around his ankles. He fell to the floor just before the Dick's employee fired the gun. The bullet went through a football a good six feet from Cooper's head, instantly deflating it.

"Ha!" Cooper called out. "I'm down here, asshole!" This guy was obviously a decent shot when he had time to line up his aim. He was useless when he had to shoot on the fly. Either that, or he was distracted by the rats nibbling at his ankles. Not wanting to gamble his life on it, Cooper scooted backwards, leaving a trail of shit and ass-blood in his wake, while the shooter kicked the rats away, reloaded his weapon, and advanced.

Where the fuck is Katherine?

Cooper continued scooting, though it was clear he wouldn't be able to make it to the end of the aisle before the shooter got off another round. Cooper had a fair amount of Hit Points, but he didn't know what the Damage range for a rifle was. And unless this guy got within a few feet of him – not likely – Cooper wouldn't be able to fight back. *Fucking pants.*

Cooper felt a pinch on his elbow. Another fucking rat. "Dude," he called out to the approaching gunman. "You have a serious pest control problem." He grabbed the rat and chucked it at him.

"The master must not be harmed," said the gunman. He was now in the football aisle with Cooper. He held up his gun, lined up his shot, and sprouted a gigantic metal dick.

"What the fuck?" said Cooper.

The gunman moaned as he slowly collapsed to the floor. Donny's father, standing behind him, relieved him of his gun as he went down, and removed the baseball bat from between his legs.

Cooper grinned. "Two balls, one strike!"

Donny's father approached Cooper. "Do you want to tell me just what the hell is going on here?"

"A lot of scary shit," said Cooper. "Now help me take these pants

off."

Donny's father pulled on the pants while Cooper did his best to anchor himself on the floor.

"Cooper!" shouted Katherine, standing over the disarmed, still-moaning gunman. "What the hell are you doing?"

Cooper covered his junk with a scrap of cardboard. "Katherine! Where the fuck have you been? I thought you were supposed to get rid of all the people." He pulled one leg free of his pants.

"I tried," said Katherine. "I summoned a bunch of rats and told them to go bite people. It sort of backfired. Now everyone's on top of checkout conveyers and display tables, screaming about the rats. Why is this man taking your pants off?"

"I thought a football uniform might give me a boost to my Armor Class," said Cooper. "Besides, I shat in these like three times already."

"Lord Almighty!" said Donny's father, dropping his end.

Cooper ripped the pants the rest of the way off his other foot, and picked up the football pants off the floor.

"Do you mind?" Cooper asked Katherine, still covering up his junk.

"Make it quick," said Katherine. She turned around.

Cooper stepped into the elastic football pants and pulled them up, careful to avoid ripping them. Donny's father helped him strap on the rest of his equipment, and then he finally slipped on his jersey.

"There you go," said Donny's father. "Why if you ain't the spittin' image of Drew Brees!"

"Is that whose jersey this is?" asked Cooper.

"Well sure it is. There's a big ol' number 9 right there."

"Sweet!"

There was a loud, creaking groan from behind as footballs and helmets began to fall from the shelves.

"What the hell?" asked Donny's father.

Before Cooper knew it, the entire shelving unit came crashing down on them. It might have squashed them all like bugs if it hadn't first hit the unit on the other side of the aisle. Still they were trapped in a triangle too small to move around in.

Katherine lay on her back, pushing against the shelving unit with her feet. She raised it a few inches, just enough for Cooper to spot little naked Ginfizzle making a run for the exit.

"He's going to get away!" said Cooper.

"Like hell he is!" said Katherine, letting go of the shelving unit. It fell onto Cooper's helmeted head.

"Ow."

Katherine dissolved into a mist and seeped out of the aisle through the gaps between shelves and football equipment.

"Her too?" asked Donny's father. "Can you do that?"

"No," said Cooper. "But I can do this." He lay down on his back, braced his feet against the shelving unit, and said, "I'm really angry!"

His heart raced, feeding blood to his expanding mass of muscles. His helmet fit tighter on his head. His football pants felt like they had stretched to their limit. His shoulder pads fit like he had accidentally put on a child's pair. He kicked the shelving unit so hard that it overcorrected itself and fell the other way.

"Goddamn!" said Donny's father.

Cooper ran after Katherine and Ginfizzle, who were both in their corporal forms again. As fast as he was, he wasn't going to catch them before Ginfizzle escaped into the night again.

"What's with these fucking rats?" said a police officer as he entered the store. "Everyone calm down!" he said, addressing the crowd of people standing on top of the checkout conveyers. "Can somebody tell me what the hell all of this commotion is about?"

"There!" said a young Asian woman, pointing Cooper's way.

The officer looked first at Ginfizzle. "What the hell?"

Katherine threw a billiard ball at Ginfizzle's head, hitting it pretty fucking hard.

"Yaaaaaah!" cried Ginfizzle as he tumbled forward.

"Hey!" said the police officer, putting his hand on the gun in his belt holster, but then looked quizzically at Ginfizzle, who barely missed a step and was back up and running again.

When the officer finally noticed Cooper, he drew his weapon and fired, catching Cooper in the chest.

Cooper knew he'd been hit, but the pain barely registered.

"No!" Katherine cried. She stopped and gave the police officer a good hard stare. When their eyes were locked, she said, "Shoot the boy."

"As my master commands," said the police officer. He pointed his gun at the defenseless, naked little boy and pulled the trigger.

Just as the shot was fired, Ginfizzle took his mist form again. It was impossible to tell whether he caught the bullet first or not.

"Holy shit!" said the police officer. "He exploded!

Everyone on top of the checkout conveyers screamed. They screamed at what they thought were tiny particles of vaporized little boy hanging among them in the air. Some of them still screamed about the rats. But mostly they screamed at the huge monster still running toward them after having taken a bullet to the chest. Cooper couldn't blame them.

"Stay behind me, Master," said the police officer, pointing his gun at Cooper.

"No!" Katherine pushed him, but the gun fired, hitting Cooper in his right arm. She spun the officer around and took the gun out of his

hand. “Stop shooting Drew Brees!”

“That’s Drew Brees?” said the officer. “Forgive me, Master, but I don’t think –”

“Do you doubt me!” said Katherine.

“Never, Master! I am your humble serv— Holy shit! I just shot Drew Brees!” He spun around toward Cooper. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Brees! Oh my God, is that your throwing arm?”

“It’s cool,” said Cooper. “I’ll be good as new in a day.”

“Do you think I could get you to sign an autograph for my son? He’s a big fan.”

Cooper thought. Would Drew Brees want people to think he was illiterate, or just an asshole? It was a conundrum. Cooper made a judgment call. “No,” he said. “Fuck off.”

“Come on!” said Katherine. “Ginny’s getting away.”

The pink cloud had reached the glass front doors and was slowly seeping between the gap between them. Once the mist got outside it made a hard right, traveling in a thin stream much faster than it had been traveling inside, disappearing behind the brick wall. The mist that hadn’t yet escaped through the door began to coalesce into quasi-corporal forms. Two hands, clutching at the double doors, trying to pull itself back inside. Just above the hands, it took on the form of Ginfizzle’s desperate, panicked face. These forms melted as more and more of the mist seeped through the crack in the doors.

Cooper and Katherine followed it outside, but there was no cloud of mist. No dire wolves or bats. Just a groundskeeper standing behind Tim, who was holding a running leaf blower.

“Open the bag,” said Tim.

Cooper pulled out the Bag of Holding. Tim put the end of the leaf blower into the bag, changed the setting from ‘suck’ to ‘blow’, and blew Ginfizzle into captivity.

Chapter 24

"Some chick we found wandering around on the mountain," said the one who had grabbed Stacy on the mountain. His voice wasn't like the others. It was rougher and throatier, like Cooper's, but without any of the kindness or swearing. "Mordred says we're supposed to keep her safe and keep our hands off her."

That was some small consolation, though the one who had frisked her and tied her up did more thorough a job checking her for weapons than was strictly necessary. Still, wherever she was, it was better than the fate she'd thought she had in store. Nerd rape in an Olive Garden bathroom.

The big one lifted her up off the carpet and set her down on cold, hard stone. The bag was yanked off her head. She was determined not to cry or show any fear, but four pairs of eyes staring back at her overrode her determination. The gag kept her from crying out, but she had no doubt that her own eyes were positively radiating fear, just as surely as her captors' eyes broadcasted their own emotions.

The big one with the monster face and shiny armor sneered at her. He just flat out hated her.

The tall, skinny guy next to him was the one she had to watch out for. He licked his lips. His rat-like eyes were full of lust. He was the one who had frisked her and curled her hair around his fingers while they traveled. Stacy had no doubt the wheels inside his head were turning, looking for a loophole around Mordred's orders. She made it her first priority to never be alone with him.

The pale one in the black hooded robe was the one who frightened her most. He looked at her with cold, calculating disinterest. She wasn't a person to him, or even a disposable piece of ass. She was a card to be played at a more opportune moment.

Only the new guy, the one who hadn't been with the group when she was taken, appeared to have any humanity in him. His eyes darted back and forth between Stacy and his companions, and the concern she saw in them told her that he shared her assessment of their feelings toward her. Or else he could be drunk.

"I'm going to go back and finish off that nest of dragons," said the big one. "Are you guys coming, or are you going to stay here and jerk off to your new pet?"

"You all go," said the thin one. "I'll stay here and watch over her."

"No!" said the new guy, perhaps a little too enthusiastically. The rest of them looked at him. "You need to level up." *Good save, dude.*

"Scott is correct," said the pale one. He turned to the thin one. "You've done too much whoring and too little fighting. You're at least

three levels below the rest of us, and you're only a rogue."

"*Only a rogue?*" said the thin one. "Was I *only a rogue* when I disarmed the trap that would have filled you with poisoned darts?"

"Your skills are useful," said the pale one. "But only in very specific circumstances. You must be ready for the coming battle."

The thin one scoffed. "I could take down any of you before you even knew I was –"

"Rot!" said the pale one.

The thin one collapsed to a heap on the floor, coughing up blood. His skin turned yellow, bubbling with pus-filled sores.

"Come on, man," said the new guy. "Not this again."

The pale one ignored him, walking in a circle around his companion writhing on the floor. "Is that how you intend to seize control of the gulf coast? Hide behind some bushes with a crossbow? Scott's fireballs will create hundreds of dead for me to animate. Eric's got enough Hit Points to shrug off a cruise missile. How many dart traps do you expect the National Guard to set when they descend upon us?"

The guy on the floor convulsed with less fervor. His face had turned green and looked like it might just fall off.

"Dude," said the new guy. "You're killing him!"

The pale one snapped his fingers. "Restore."

The thin one's skin became healthy. The open sores closed. The color returned to normal. He turned his head and vomited a torrent of blood and bile, then gasped for air until he got his breathing under control.

"Do not squander what opportunities you are given," said the pale one, stepping onto the red, rectangular carpet, which seemed to be the only decorative effort anyone had thought to put into this house. "Come."

The thin one obediently hopped onto the carpet, followed by the big one.

The pale one turned to the new guy, the one called Scott. "If the girl tries anything, use a Sleep or Hold Person spell to secure her. You must let no harm come to her. She is to be Mordred's queen."

"I understand," said the new guy. He gave a halfhearted salute as the carpet levitated through the air and flew out the window. He walked over to the window and watched his friends fly away for a while. Then he kneeled in front of Stacy. "I'm going to take this gag off. There ain't no point in screaming, 'cause there's no one around to hear you. Got it?"

Stacy nodded. The new guy untied the knot at the back of her head, and the gag came loose. Stacy took a few deep breaths, just because she could.

"Your name's Scott?" she asked. *Establish a personal connection.*

"You call me…" he started heatedly, then thought better of it. He nodded. "Yeah, Scott's fine."

"I'm Stacy."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Stacy," said Scott. "But listen. I've really got to pee. Can you just hang out here and not get into any trouble for a minute?"

Stacy nodded.

"Do you want a drink or something?"

A drink sounded really good right about now. The intoxicating effects of six Manhattans had disappeared when she arrived in this world. And she might be able to use the ol' drink-your-captor-under-the-table gambit and escape. "I'd kill for a drink."

Scott smiled. "I've got just the thing. Be right back!" He hurried out of the room.

Stacy took stock of her surroundings. Her first priority was getting her arms free. With them being tied behind her back, she could keep pretending she was bound as long as she had to. The stone floor was too smooth to fray the rope, but there were weapons lying around everywhere. She spotted a dagger, mentally planned out a roll which would put her hands on it, and then carried out the act.

She had misjudged the placement of her hands by an inch or two due to her breasts being slightly larger than what she was used to. She thought of Julian and hoped her ears weren't all weird. With a bit of scooting around, she secured a grip on the dagger's handle, then inchwormed back into her original place.

Stacy's hands were free by the time Scott arrived with two large glasses of something blue. And for what little it was probably worth, she was armed.

"You'll have to help me," said Stacy. She gave him a perky grin and shrugged. "I'm all tied up."

"Oh right," said Scott. He held Stacy's glass to her lips and tipped it toward her. She kept her eyes fixed on his. His mouth hung open as he concentrated on not spilling the drink. The temptation to shove her dagger straight into his throat was a very real one, but Stacy couldn't work up the nerve just yet. She'd never stabbed anyone before, and this was too big a gamble. If she missed somehow, she was as good as dead with her feet still tied up. Besides, she still had some time. If the others were going to the same place they had just come from, that was at least half an hour by flying carpet each way. She'd see how the drinking scenario worked out before rushing into straight-up murder.

Stacy dipped her tongue into the drink. It was cool and sweet, and there was definitely some booze in it. She slurped some of it into her mouth, but let some dribble down her chin and drip down on her

chest.

"Oh man, I'm sorry!" said Scott. He wiped her chin with his thumb, but hesitated before wiping her upper boob.

"It's okay," said Stacy, deliberately keeping it vague as to whether she was responding to his apology or granting him permission to touch her.

Scott took the bait, thoroughly wiping away the spilled drink from the top of her breasts with the palm of his hand.

"Watch those paws, tiger," said Stacy. She squeezed the handle of the dagger in her hand.

Scott jerked his hand back as if Stacy's breasts had turned into snakes. "I'm so sorry." His face was beet red. He took a long swig of his own drink.

"That's good," said Stacy. "Did you make that?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Scott. He gulped back the rest of his glass.

Yes, ma'am? How old was this guy? How old did she look, for that matter? She needed a mirror.

"Can I have some more?"

"Yes ma'am." He brought the glass to Stacy's lips again. This time she drank in earnest, not letting any of it spill. She didn't want to drink so much that she lost her wits, but she could sure use some liquid nerve.

Stacy tilted her chin forward to signal that she'd had enough after she drank back half the glass. Scott set it down on the floor between them.

"Do you have anything to eat?" asked Stacy. She was genuinely hungry, but more concerned about getting Scott out of the room. There was a small, wooden box to her left that was nagging at her curiosity. It was about the size of a breadbox, the lid adorned with red-specked black opals in the shape of a skull. *Poison.*

"We've got some hippogriff meat left over from a couple of days ago," said Scott. "It's kind of chewy, but it's not so bad if you dip it in some honey."

That sounded revolting. "Mmm," said Stacy. "That sounds delicious. I'm starving."

Scott hopped up like he'd just sat on a tack. "I'll be right back."

When she deemed it safe enough to do so, Stacy scooted toward the box and opened the lid. The inside was lined with racks holding test tubes. The test tubes were filled with liquids of varying colors. The ones Stacy was most interested in were the ones with no color at all, and maybe the lighter blue ones.

She pulled the cork out of a clear tube and gave it a sniff. It had a faint minty aroma, but it would easily be overpowered by booze. She quickly poured the liquid into Scott's glass, where it mingled nicely

with the last little bit of drink he'd left in there.

There was a whoosh and a sudden orange glow from the other room. Stacy hurriedly placed the empty tube back in the box, closed the lid, and scooted back to her original position.

She hoped the poison was something that would just knock him unconscious for a while or, at worst, make him really sick. She'd feel bad if it killed him. But the choice between killing a guy or waiting around for his psychopath friends to come back was no choice at all.

Scott returned with a dish full of sizzling, bite-sized chunks of meat, a small bowl of honey, a fork, and a pitcher full of the blue drink.

"I had to reheat it," he said. "I used a fireball spell. I'm a wizard."

The look he gave her suggested that she was supposed to be impressed by this information, so she played along. "Oh my! You can do *magic*?"

"Um… yeah." Scott's enthusiasm faltered. She'd overplayed it. She must have sounded sarcastic. They were both from a world where women were not impressed by magicians.

"That's not all I can do," Scott continued. "I can hold my own in a fight too. Check this out!" He pulled a shiny metallic rod out from under his robe. It looked kind of like a high-end flashlight, only with a studded head. He pushed a button on the shaft, and a ginormous fiery blade sprang out of the top. He waved it around, making *vrumm vrumm* noises with his mouth. "FIRE SWORD!"

Stacy felt the wussy little dagger in her hands, and felt better about not engaging in hand-to-hand combat with this lunatic. He was drunk and waving this extremely dangerous weapon around like a kid with his dad's gun. She needed to bring this under control.

"I'm more interested in the magic," said Stacy, hoping she could sell it better this time. "Can you show me some tricks?"

Scott stopped waving his fire sword and grinned from ear to ear. "Sure!" *He bought it.*

He pushed a button on the shaft again, causing the flaming blade to retract back into the rod. Sitting down on the floor, he placed the weapon down next to him.

He picked up the fork and his face turned serious. "You'll notice there are no strings or wires attached to this fork."

Oh my God. He's actually doing a magician routine. Stacy briefly reconsidered taking her chances with hand-to-hand combat.

He poked the fork into a chunk of meat, but left it there on the dish. After mumbling some incoherent words, he waved his hands, and the fork rose from the dish and hung in the air. It wobbled a bit, then steadied. The fork dipped the meat into the honey and hovered over the bowl until it stopped dripping. Scott swirled his hands around one another, and the fork pointed the meat directly at Stacy. Slowly, the

fork advanced, stopping just short of her mouth. It stayed there until she accepted the meat. The fork tugged back, as if not wanting to let go. Stacy looked awkwardly at him, not knowing what to do with the fork in her mouth.

"Sorry," he said. He grabbed the fork with his hand and pulled it out of her mouth.

"Impressive," said Stacy, her mouth full of meat. It was chewy like he said it would be, but it tasted a lot better than she'd expected. "You said this is hippo?"

"Hippogriff," said Scott, refilling Stacy's glass, then his own. "It's like a cross between a horse and an eagle."

"You mean a Pegasus?"

"No," said Scott. "A Pegasus is just a winged horse. A hippogriff has the back end of a horse, and the front end of an eagle. Talons, beak, the whole works."

"Hmph," said Stacy. "You mind giving me another bite?"

"Sure," said Scott. He started to mumble again.

"Oh come on, dude," said Stacy. "Just use your hands. I'm starving."

Scott picked up the fork, poked another piece of meat, and put it in Stacy's mouth.

Stacy chewed, swallowed, and looked at Scott. "Help me wash it down?"

Scott helped Stacy with her drink. She tilted her head back, gulping down every last drop, hoping it would encourage him to do the same. It burned going down. The alcohol wasn't particularly strong, but she was more accustomed to sipping than gulping. She thought she might choke or spit it out, but she managed to keep it down.

"Gosh," said Scott. "You must be thirsty."

"I'm your prisoner," said Stacy with a coy smile. "I've got to take advantage of whatever pleasure I can find." She couldn't believe how badly she was hamming up this seductress act, but Scott was eating it up, and she was starting to get a nice buzz going. She nodded at Scott's drink. "Your turn." *Was that too pushy? Would he be suspicious?*

Nope. Scott grabbed his drink determinedly, poured it down his throat, and disappeared.

"The hell?" said Stacy.

"What's wrong?" said Scott. He was sitting about two feet to the left of where he had just been, looking straight ahead. "What are you looking at?" he asked when she turned to look at him. He looked over to his right and set his glass down on the floor.

When he let go of the glass, it disappeared. Or rather, it teleported to the part of the floor right in front of Stacy… exactly where it would be if he was sitting where he was supposed to be. *Well, that's fucking*

weird.

Was he still in front of her?

"Are you okay?" asked Scott.

Stacy forced herself to look straight ahead. "Yeah, I'm just hungry still." She looked at the dish and made some mental predictions.

Just as she expected, the fork vanished, followed by a piece of meat. And then the surface of the honey was indented a couple of times. Stacy remained facing straight forward. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth. It was better for Scott to think this was some strange flirty thing than for him to see her awkwardly feeling around with her mouth for an invisible piece of meat.

"Mmmmm," she said once the meat was in her mouth. She kept her eyes closed. "It's soooo good." It was hard to sound sexy with a big chunk of meat in her mouth. She needed time to think. Those weren't vials of poison in that box. They must be magic potions. Feeding them to Scott wasn't going to do her any good. She was in a bad enough spot as it was without giving him random super powers.

"There's more where that came from?" said Scott. *Was he just groping for something to say? Or was this the inevitable start of sexual innuendo? She had to get rid of him.*

"My neck itches," said Stacy, tilting her head to the right, giving him as much neck exposure as she could. "Could you give it a little scratch?" She kept her eyes closed and waited.

"Sure," said Scott. She felt his fingernails clumsily scratching the side of her neck.

"More around the back," said Stacy. "A little lower now."

"Like that?"

"Ooh, that's good." Stacy heaved her breasts forward until she could feel Scott breathing on them. She opened her eyes. She could feel his breath and fingers, but he still appeared to be two feet to her left. And then, just like that, he was right there again. Stacy jumped.

Scott pulled his hand back. "Sorry!"

"No, it's okay," said Stacy. She smiled at him. "I just got a little shiver, that's all."

"I'll be right back," said Scott. "I've got to go to the bathroom again."

Uh-huh.

"You know, once the floodgates open…"

Of course.

"I'll be right back."

Stacy smiled. "I'll be right here."

He either genuinely had to pee, which would take him more time because he'd have to calm his erection down first, or he was going to rub one out. Either way, Stacy had just bought herself some time.

If she was going to gamble, she was going to go all in. She cut the rope binding her feet together and pulled a sword out of a nearby barrel to replace the one they'd taken from her, and a little brown bag that was sitting next to it. She put Scott's silver, bulb-headed stick in the bag. She didn't know if she'd be able to use it, but she preferred that at least he *not* be able to. Then she made for the potion box. She sucked back tube after tube, not caring what they looked or tasted like, though some of them were vile, or what changes she felt happening to her body. She'd consumed half the box when she couldn't physically stomach anymore.

When her feeding frenzy had ended, Stacy looked to see what, if any, changes had taken place. She was about ten feet tall, her skin was thicker, rougher, and browner than it had been before, and she was uncharacteristically pissed off.

She knew she didn't have much time, but she needed to vent some of her aggression. She punched the white dragon head, feeling no pain at all in her rough, brown hands, until she was satisfied that it wouldn't look good on anyone's wall. Then she threw it out the window, because screw these guys. It landed with a splash.

Stacy looked out the window to see that the pulverized dragon head was murking up the water of what appeared to be a swimming pool. She wondered if it would be wiser to jump out the window, or try to exit through the house and risk running into Scott.

Fuck it. She was huge. She jumped out the window, and was surprised to find that she wasn't falling. She was just hanging there in the open air.

She willed herself away from the house, and was pleased to find that it was as easy as that. She was flying. Scanning the horizon, she saw the walls of a large city in the distance, and figured that was as good a place as any to go. She flew Superman-style toward the city, twenty feet of nothing but air between herself and the windblown waves of grass below. The wind rushing past her face and whipping her hair around was exhilarating. She drew her sword and let out a barbaric victory roar.

"YEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH

She was surprised to find that her voice was as deep as Cooper's, but she didn't care.

"YEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaah?" About halfway between her captors' house and the city ahead, Stacy's voice returned to its normal pitch. Her skin wasn't brown or rough anymore. She appeared to be her normal size. She looked down. The ground was rapidly rushing toward her.

"Oh sh—"

Chapter 25

Tim sat on the curb of the Target on the other side of the shopping center, idly watching his undead sister bite the heads off rats and suck down their blood. It was mildly horrifying at first, but he had other things on his mind.

Target had closed for the night. They were far enough away from the police action still going on at Dick's Sporting Goods that they wouldn't bring any undue attention to themselves. At the same time, they had a nice, wide-open expanse of parking lot between themselves, Dick's, and the Olive Garden. If there were any elven wizards or talking birds frolicking about in the area, they shouldn't be too hard to spot.

"Where the hell could he be?" asked Tim.

"Did you pick a spot to meet in case things went wrong?" asked Cooper, his football helmeted head resting sullenly in his palms.

"Of course not," said Tim. "It was such a simple plan. Wait for them to leave. Follow them. There was literally nothing that could go wrong. I mean, not unless a giant wolf and bat were to go and charge through the scene, fucking everything up, that is."

Katherine spit out a rat head. "We were just doing what you told us to do."

"Really?" said Tim. "I don't recall asking you to shoot up an Olive Garden or trash a Dick's. All I remember me asking you to do was to catch one stupid little vampire. And guess who ended up doing that?" He shoved his thumb into his chest. "Me. With a fucking leaf blower."

"I checked around and behind every store in the shopping center," said Katherine. "He's gone."

"He and the bird have probably gone off chasing a butterfly or something," said Cooper. "You know how easily distracted he gets. I wouldn't worry about him."

"I'm not worried about *him*," said Tim. "I'm worried about Stacy. She's alone and helpless in another world, and those four assholes have her. She's as good as dead if we don't find – Oh shit."

"What?" said Katherine, hiding a half-sucked rat corpse behind her back.

The last of the police cars were leaving Dick's, the cops inside them no doubt shaking their heads at the crazy witness testimonies that they'd received. All but one of them were headed back out toward the highway. The exception was creeping slowly toward Tim, Cooper, and Katherine. The headlights were turned off, like it was in stealth mode, but the parking lot lights exposed it for what it was. Definitely a cop car, and definitely headed toward them.

"Guys," said Tim. "Get ready to bolt. Cooper, open the Bag of Holding."

Cooper opened the bag and held it low for Tim. "Here you go."

"Uh-uh," said Tim. "You first."

"Why me?"

"Because there's a pissed-off vampire in there, and you've got more Hit Points."

Cooper nodded and stepped into the open bag. He sank as though there was a hole in the sidewalk, and disappeared inside the bag. Tim was just about to jump in after him when the cop car's PA system kicked on.

"Tim!" said the staticky, amplified electronic voice. "Your chicken gave me diarrhea, and you have three overdue library books."

"What the fuck?" Tim said to himself. Something wasn't right. He hadn't been inside a library for years.

"Let me try!" said a higher voice from inside the cop car. The speakers buzzed, clicked, and whined. "Hellooooooooo!"

Goosewaddle.

Tim dragged his forefinger across the front of his neck, signaling for them to shut up. "It's Dave."

"Where the hell did he get a fuzzmobile?" asked Katherine.

"Who the fuck knows?" said Tim. "Get Cooper out of the bag, would you?"

Katherine reached inside the Bag of Holding. "Cooper." Cooper's hand locked grabbed Katherine's wrist, and she yanked him out of the bag. His chest and arms were riddled with parallel sets of scratches.

"What happened in there?" asked Tim.

"You were right," said Cooper. "The little guy is pissed."

"Are you okay?" asked Katherine.

"I'll be fine. I punched him in the head. He's cartwheeling through the void right now." He looked at the approaching police car. "Um… why the fuck haven't we moved?"

The police car stopped. The two front doors opened. Chaz stepped out of the passenger's side, and Dennis stepped out of the driver's side.

"You let him drive?" asked Tim.

Chaz shrugged. "It's his car. Anyway, I think we can trust him now."

"You think we can *trust* him?"

Dennis looked down at Tim. "I want my balls back."

What kind of promises had Chaz made? Someone would pay for this later, Tim had no doubt. But if it was keeping Dennis in line right now, so be it. Tim had more pressing concerns. "Of course."

Dave knocked on the rear passenger's side window. Chaz opened the door to let him, Randy, and Professor Goosewaddle out.

“Professor!” said Tim. “I need your help.”

Professor Goosewaddle puffed out his gnomish chest. “I’ll do what I can.”

“Do you remember Mordred, the guy who ran out of my restaurant when we first arrived in this world?”

“The heavyset fellow?”

“That’s right!” said Tim. “He’s taken Stacy. We have to find him, but I’m all out of ideas. Please tell me you’ve got a spell or something that can help us.”

“Like a Scrying spell?”

Tim slapped both palms against his forehead. “Scrying! Why didn’t I think of that before?” His heart skipped a beat as he grabbed the professor by the shoulders. “Please tell me you’ve got one memorized.”

“Of course,” said the professor. “I had two, but we had to use one in order to chase down these two.” He nodded at Dennis and Randy.

Tim glared at Chaz.

“What?” said Chaz. “They overpowered me. What the fuck was I supposed to do? I’m a fucking bard. Anyway, he said he’s got another one.”

Tim turned his attention back to Goosewaddle. “We need to find Mordred, like right now.”

“Do any of you have a mirror?”

“Here,” said Katherine, pulling her compact mirror out of her purse. “It’s no use to me anymore.”

Professor Goosewaddle closed his eyes and mumbled an incantation. When he opened them again, he appeared to be in a trance. He stared into the mirror. “I see him.”

Tim looked into the mirror over Professor Goosewaddle’s shoulder. All he could see was himself and the professor. “Where is he?”

“He is in a small, tiled room. He is naked. A constant spray of water is raining down on him.”

“He’s taking a shower,” said Dave.

Tim nodded. That sounded about right.

“So wait,” said Katherine. “When you get that spell, you can just watch people shower anytime you want?”

“Shut up, Katherine!” said Tim. “Professor, keep watching. Try to be more specific.”

“He is lathering up his genitals with a tiny bar of soap.”

“Okay, less specific,” said Tim. “Try to get a sense of his surroundings.”

“I can only see what he sees,” said the professor. “And right now he appears to be quite fixated on his engorged penis.”

“I can’t listen to any more of this,” said Katherine. “I’m going to

have another look for Julian." She turned into a normal-sized bat and flapped away.

"Okay professor," said Tim. "Let's hold off on the commentary until after he gets out of the shower."

"He's exiting the water room."

"That was fast," said Cooper. "He's already finished choking the bishop?"

"He is donning a white robe."

"What else do you see in the room?" said Tim. He began to fear that they were getting nowhere with this spell.

"The room is illuminated by glass bulbs glowing with white light."

Great. So they know he has electricity. That should narrow down the search. "Keep talking."

"Mordred is applying some kind of blue ointment onto a bristled stick. Now he's looking in the mirror and rubbing the ointment onto his teeth."

"He's brushing his teeth," said Dave. "This is riveting."

Tim shushed Dave. "This is all we have to go on. Keep watching, Professor. Tell us what you see."

"He has just entered a spacious bedroom. It would not look out of place at the king's palace."

That wasn't what Tim was expecting, but Goosewaddle's perception of 'palatial' might be different than his own. "What do you see on the walls? Are there pictures of wizards and dragons?"

"The walls are clean, and devoid of much in the way of decoration. There is an occasional tasteful painting hanging here and there."

Clean, spacious, and tasteful were not adjectives Tim would have imagined appropriate to describe whatever dank shithole a guy like Mordred crawled out of every day. Something was wrong. This place sounded more like a – "Goddammit," said Tim. "He's in a fucking hotel."

"That's not a bad thing," said Dave. "We know he's got his dice with him. We can go back to the Chicken Hut, look up nearby hotels online, and let Professor Goosewaddle identify the interior."

Tim nodded slowly. "It could work."

"He has climbed onto the bed," said Professor Goosewaddle. "He is pointing a rectangular device at the magic screen on the wall. A human male is copulating with two human females. Mordred is opening his robe. He sighed the word *Stacy*."

"I'll fucking kill him," said Tim. "Okay, Goosewaddle. That's enough. You don't want to see the rest of this."

Tim's phone rang. The number wasn't one he was familiar with. He answered it. "Hello?"

"Tim! It's me, Julian."

“Where the fuck have you been? We’ve been looking all over for you! Why didn’t you answer your phone?”

“Battery’s dead.”

“Where are you?”

“At the Beauregard casino.”

“What the fuck, man?” said Tim. “The Olive Garden not exciting enough for you? You thought you’d spice things up a bit with a little blackjack?”

“Would you just listen to what –”

“No!” said Tim. “You listen! We’re in some serious shit. Mordred sent Stacy into the game world, and we’ve got no idea where he is.”

“That’s why I’m here,” said Julian. “Ravenus and I followed Mordred here. He checked into the hotel.”

Chapter 26

Passing through the walls into the city proper felt like an accomplishment, but Stacy harbored no illusions about being safe. She'd taken one last look behind her before stepping through the gate, and hadn't seen any angry, drunk wizards hot on her trail, but if Scott was after her, he wouldn't have any more trouble than she did passing through the gate. There were no checkpoints, no questions, barely even a passing glance from the guards posted outside. And those passing glances she got felt less like *I wonder if she's a terrorist*, and more like *Check out that sweet ass*.

Another safety concern was the types of people who populated this city. Sure, back at the villa there were four guys who probably wanted to rape and murder her, but at least they had Mordred's orders not to. The same couldn't be said for the people around here.

The word 'people' might have been generous. There were all sorts of creatures roaming around that Stacy wasn't sure qualified as people. There were, of course, the elves and dwarves and whatever Cooper was, but she'd been expecting those. It was the other things that gave her pause. Furry things, scaly things, toothy things. Things with hooves, things with horns, things with tails. About a quarter of the population looked like the DNA of some random animal had been spliced with that of a human.

Stacy hugged herself and kept to the center of a broad road, jumping every time some mutant freak grunted, hissed, snarled, clicked, buzzed, or even just looked at her. She plodded forward with no idea where she was going or what she even hoped to find. There was some kind of open space up ahead, a city center maybe. For now, that would be her goal.

"Excuse me," said a man's voice from behind her. A finger touched her right shoulder.

Stacy spun around and planted a boot right between the man's legs. He folded up like a lawn chair and fell on his side. He was human, bald, and dressed in a simple gray robe. She drew her sword and pointed it down at him.

"Why the nuts?" gasped the man on the ground. "Why is it always the nuts?"

"Who are you?" said Stacy, making an extra effort to keep her voice from shaking. "What do you want with me?"

"You looked lost," said the man. "I was going to ask if you needed directions."

"Ho there!" said one of two uniformly armored guards stomping briskly toward them. "What's all this?"

"Shit," said the man on the ground. "Kingsguard." He looked up at Stacy. "Listen, lady. There is no due process here. They will throw your ass in the slammer and forget about you. Put the sword away."

Due process? The slammer? Stacy slipped the sword into the sheath strapped to her back, surprised at the grace and effortlessness with which she did so. The bald man stood up.

"Who would disturb the king's peace?" demanded the slightly larger of the two guards.

"It was a misunderstanding," said the bald man.

"Drawing a weapon unprovoked is a jailable offense," said the guard. He looked at Stacy. "Did this man threaten you?"

That was odd. Were they focused on him now? Did they just want to arrest anyone? Or maybe they wanted –

"Excuse me, gentlemen," said the bald man. The two guards nodded as the bald man led Stacy by the arm a few feet away. "Do you have any money?"

"What?" said Stacy.

"They're looking for a bribe. Don't even try to argue. It's just the way things are done here. If you screw up, but they don't see you as a real threat, they'll just let you off a couple of coins lighter in your purse. You don't want to see the inside of a Cardinian prison. You can bet your buns there's no cable TV."

"Who *are* you?"

"We can talk once they're gone. I'd really hate for you to have to give up that beautiful sword. Do you have any money or not?"

"I don't know. Let me look in my bag." It only now occurred to Stacy how unusually light the bag slung around her shoulder was. It didn't feel empty when she'd grabbed it at Scott's villa, but even now it didn't feel quite as heavy as that strange weapon she'd thrown inside it. She opened it up, but it was too dark inside to see anything. She put her hand inside and felt nothing, not even the weapon. She turned to the guards. "I've been robbed!"

The smaller guard rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Pathetic."

"Come on, then," said the larger guard. Both of them started walking casually toward Stacy and the bald man. "We're placing both of you under arrest for disturbing the king's peace."

"Aw come on, guys," said the bald man. "I've got money back at home. If you just follow me there."

The younger guard snorted. "That's exactly what we aim to do. Follow you home. Your *new* home, that is."

Stacy noticed something strange. Not only could she not feel anything inside the bag. She couldn't even feel the inside of the bag itself. She put her arm deeper inside, all the way up to the elbow, and still couldn't feel the bottom. Her hand should be poking right through

it by now.

"Holy crap!" she said. "Check this out." Her entire right arm was submerged in the bag, all the way up to her shoulder. Raising her arm, she let the bag go with her other hand. She looked like an amputee, but she could feel her arm and hand just fine. "Where the hell is my arm?" she said, waving her bag-covered stump around.

The guards stopped in their tracks, looked at one another, and started laughing.

"What are you doing?" whispered the bald man.

"I don't know!" Stacy whispered back at him.

"Say gold."

"What? Why?"

"Just say it!"

"Gold," said Stacy. Suddenly, she felt something in her phantom hand. Several somethings. They were cold, hard, circular, and metallic. Coins, about the size of a silver dollar. She pulled her hand out of the bag to discover she was holding a fistful of solid gold coins. "Holy shit!"

The guards were still laughing. Now they clapped as well, as if Stacy had been performing a comedy act.

"Yes, very nice," said the bald man. "Now if you'll kindly pay these gentlemen, we can be on our way."

"Oh," said Stacy. "Okay. Here you go." She slapped the whole handful, maybe a dozen coins in all, into the larger guard's open palm.

"Wait!" said the bald man. "No!"

"Huh?" said Stacy.

"Thank you kindly, miss," said the smaller guard with a polite bow.

"You two stay out of trouble now," said the other one as he let the coins trickle out of his hand into a small pouch on his belt. The two of them rushed off like they suddenly had somewhere important to be.

"A coin a piece would have gotten rid of them just fine," said the bald man. "You didn't have to give them so much gold."

"Yeah, well I'm not from around here."

"I guessed as much."

"Yes," said Stacy, giving the bald man a narrow-eyed stare. "You did. And just how did you guess?"

"I've seen new players enter the city before. You stick out like a sore thumb growing on someone's face."

"Was I that bad?"

"You looked like Glenn Beck lost in Harlem."

Stacy nodded. "That's pretty bad."

"Now I've got a question for you," said the bald man. "If you've only just arrived here, how did you manage to come by a vorpal sword and a Bag of Holding?"

“I stole it from some guys who kidnapped me. They called themselves the Horsemen.”

“Shit,” said the bald man. He put out his hand. “My name is Stuart, and there are some people I think you should meet.”

Chapter 27

Julian sat on a bench across the street from the Beauregard Resort and Casino. Ravenus was perched on top of the bench next to him.

"That's a lot of rooms," said Julian.

"Indeed," said Ravenus. "That's the tallest building I've seen for miles around here."

"It's the tallest building in the state of Mississippi," said Julian. "How the hell are we supposed to find Mordred's room?"

"I could fly by and peek into windows," suggested Ravenus.

"Thanks," said Julian. "But that won't do. Mordred knows you."

"You could inquire with the tavern staff."

"Not here," said Julian. "They'd never give that kind of information to some guy coming in off the street."

"Not even if they were *magically* persuaded?"

Julian nodded. "Good thinking, Ravenus. A Charm Person spell would probably do the trick, but I used up my last first level spell for the day to get here."

"It is unfortunate that your horse met such a tragic end at the hands of that… what did you call that again?"

Julian hung his head. "A bus." He should have ordered the horse to stand in one place.

Ravenus patted a wing on Julian's shoulder. "He was taken before his time."

That much was true. That horse had a good ninety minutes left in him at least.

Julian thought about his repertoire of zero-level spells. None of them seemed particularly beneficial for gathering information, but one of them might come in handy at – *No, it was a stupid idea. But as long as they were just going to sit around and wait anyway…*

"Ravenus," said Julian. "Hang out here for a little while. I'll be back."

"Of course, sir."

Julian crossed the street and strolled through the front entrance of the resort. He had always been too broke and too cheap to be much of a gambler, but he'd been in here a few times before when coworkers or classmates had talked him into it. The incessant ringing of hundreds of slot machines led him to the part of the gaming area he was familiar with. He'd developed a strategy for always coming out ahead at casinos. He would sit at a bar, tip the bartender ten bucks, and slowly feed twenty dollars' worth of credits into a video poker machine while the bartender kept feeding him complimentary drinks. Sure, he'd always lose the twenty dollars eventually, but when he

thought about how much it would cost him to get that shitfaced at a standard bar, he counted himself way ahead.

Right now, however, Julian was interested in neither slot machines nor video poker. He walked over to the table games area, and there it was, like a big, shiny pie stuffed with cash. Roulette.

Having no money on him, he had one small obstacle in his way before he could put his idea to the test. He walked over to the roulette wheel and looked for an easy mark.

He settled for a woman in the tail end of middle-age. Shiny sequined dress, gaudy jewelry, white hair, plastic-surgery stretched face, and a cigarette hanging out of her mouth with a good inch of untapped ash at the end. The best part was that she appeared to be unaccompanied. This was a lonely, bored, rich old woman whose only thrill left in life was throwing money away. *Perfect.*

Julian sidled up to the table next to her. "19 feels lucky."

"Heh!" the woman said through the side of her mouth not holding the cigarette. "If I was 19, I'd feel lucky too. But I always bet on black." She pushed stacks of red chips to various black numbers on the table, and then a larger stack on the box labeled *Black*. If there was a strategy at work here, Julian didn't know what it was. But then, he wasn't a roulette player.

"Suit yourself, but twenty bucks says it lands on 19."

The old woman gave him a scrutinizing stare, then turned back to the table. She placed a single red chip on the square marked *19*. "I suppose I better make sure I win either way. You've got your bet."

"Mage Hand," Julian mumbled to himself in a British accent.

"What did you say?" asked the old woman.

"Nothing," said Julian. He focused on the roulette ball. If he was wrong about this, he was in for an awkward exit.

Once the other players had placed their bets, the dealer spun the wheel. For a moment, the ball broke free of Julian's mental tether, bouncing around erratically. Julian's heart skipped a beat, but he stayed focused on the ball, and soon locked in on it again. He let the ball continue bouncing freely while the wheel spun, giving it a couple of forced bounces here and there to reassure himself that he had the kind of control over it that he thought he did. When the wheel slowed down, he took complete control of the ball, trying to mimic its natural bouncing action until he plunked it down in the number 19 pocket and held it there.

"Nineteen!" said the dealer, raising an eyebrow at Julian. "The force is strong with this one." He slid seven stacks of red chips to the woman's single chip, then slid them all over to her.

She, in turn, slid one stack to Julian, apparently unconcerned that it was five dollars more than what she owed him. "Do that again," she

dared him.

Julian felt a rush like he hadn't felt since he'd turned into an elf. In the game world, he'd just been some loser sorcerer stumbling through a game that he didn't understand the rules to. Here he was the only fucking sorcerer in the world. Casinos were equipped for a lot, but they weren't equipped for *magic*. He had power here. He had control.

"Why don't you try it?" asked Julian. "Go ahead. Pick a number. I have every confidence in you."

A cocktail server appeared out of nowhere in Julian's personal space with a tray full of drinks. Her uniform appeared to be specifically designed to draw attention to her breasts. "Would you like something to drink?"

Julian forced himself to look at her face, and felt the Mage Hand spell dissipate. That was interesting. He'd assumed he would have to use up another spell every time the roulette wheel spun. But if his focus hadn't been compromised by the glorious cleavage he was trying so hard not to stare at, he would have been able to hold onto his control of the ball indefinitely.

"Interesting," he murmured to himself.

"Sir?" said the server.

"Oh right," said Julian. "I'm sorry." He pointed to the tallest glass, not really giving a shit what was in it. "I'll have one of those."

The server handed him the drink, which he had assumed was meant for someone else, right off the tray. "Good luck, sir," she said with a wink.

"Thanks," said Julian. He gave her the top chip from his stack. He sipped his drink. It was sweet and boozy. Turning back to the old woman, he said, "So what'll it be?"

The woman finally tapped two inches of gravity-defying ash into the ash tray while giving Julian a long, hard stare. "Okay. How about seven. That's lucky, right?"

"Sounds lucky to me," said Julian, placing his entire stack on number 7.

The old woman nodded and placed a fifty-dollar chip next to Julian's stack. Other players around the table placed their bets on various squares, but nearly all of them put at least one chip on number 7. The dealer spun the wheel.

Julian took a nice long swig of his drink and coughed into his hand. "Mage Hand." To his surprise, the booze seemed to help him latch onto the ball with his mind, like he and it were in some kind of intimate dance. Or maybe it was just easier because he'd already done it once. When he plunked the ball down into the 7 pocket, the whole table erupted in cheers.

Julian necked the rest of his drink and put a fist in the air.

“WOOOO!” he screamed as his twenty dollars turned into seven hundred.

“Me next!” said a perky brunette. It took Julian a second to realize she was talking to him.

“Excuse me?”

“Let me pick the next number.”

“Okay,” said Julian. “Have at it.”

“Twenty-four!” said the young woman, hesitating to place a chip there.

“Twenty-four it is,” said Julian, shoving all of his newly acquired stacks across the table.

“I’m sorry, sir,” said the dealer. “The maximum bet for this table is one hundred dollars.”

“Oh,” said Julian. “Okay.”

“You might find the High Rollers area more to your liking.”

“No, that’s cool,” said Julian, not wanting to cut his spell off just yet. “I’ll hang out here for a while longer.” He withdrew most of his chips, leaving behind a hundred dollars’ worth.

His bet was nestled in the middle of a bunch of other bets, and the rest of the table was bare.

So this is what a gambling high feels like.

Chapter 28

Stuart led Stacy away from the crowded streets of this city which she'd come to learn was called Cardinia. That was just fine with Stacy. The fewer and farther apart these freaks were from her, the better.

Once they were on the less crowded side streets, and Stacy grew more confident with every alley they passed that some giant purple tentacle monster wasn't going to emerge from it and grab her, her heart rate began to slow.

"Where are we going?" asked Stacy. She didn't imagine that any answer he gave would make any sense to her, but idle chatter might get her mind off of tentacle monsters.

"The Whore's Head Inn," said Stuart.

"Charming."

"It should be when we're finished."

"Finished?" said Stacy. "You mean you're building it?"

"*Re*building it," said Stuart. "Those four guys you just escaped from, they burnt it down a couple of weeks ago."

"Oh my God!" said Stacy. "Was anybody hurt?"

"Two of ours died."

Stacy gasped. "I'm so sorry."

Stuart shrugged. "It's not as bad as all that. We got them resurrected."

"Well that's convenient."

"Not really," said Stuart. "Not when you consider what we had to spend to get it done. We could have built the Whore's Head back three times the size of the original with that kind of money, or started sending people back home."

"Well if you got all that money once, why can't you do it again?"

"It wasn't as easy to come by as you might think. We had to fight a vampire. We were lucky to escape with our lives."

Stacy grimaced. "Vampires suck."

"Ha!" said Stuart. "Wait until you meet a real one."

"I have," said Stacy. "She sucks."

"I thought you said you only just got here," said Stuart. "Where did you meet a vampire?"

"It wasn't here," said Stacy. "It was back home, just before I came here."

"I'm not talking about the goth kids who hang out at Hot Topic," said Stuart. "I'm talking about real vampires. The kind that suck blood and turn into bats."

"*Yeah*," said Stacy, not appreciating the condescension in his voice. "Me too. Her name is Katherine, and she's a big bitch."

Stuart stopped walking and looked at Stacy. “The girl we went in to rescue was named Katherine. She’s Tim’s sister.”

“You know Tim?” said Stacy. She cupped her hand around the side of her mouth. “Just between you and me, I’ve got a little crush on him.”

“I can’t believe it!”

“I know,” said Stacy. “It’s weird, right? What with him being so hot-tempered and short. But sometimes the combination is just adorable.”

“No, I mean I can’t believe their plan for getting back home worked. Did you meet the others as well?”

“Well let’s see,” said Stacy. She started counting on her fingers. “I met Tim, and Julian, and Cooper.”

Stuart shook his head with what looked like a reluctant smile. “*Cooper*.”

“I know, right? He’s a trip. Now where was I… Oh yeah… And I met… What was the dwarf’s name? I can never remember.”

“Dave?”

“That’s right. And then there’s that clown guy who plays the guitar, and –”

“Clown guy?” said Stuart. His eyes suddenly widened. “Wait, back up a bit. Did you say Dave’s still a dwarf?”

“Yeah.”

“And when you said Tim was short, you didn’t mean simply below average height. You meant…” He held his hand down about three feet above the ground.

“That’s right.”

“And Katherine’s still a *vampire*?”

“And still a bitch, yes.”

“Holy crap!” said Stuart. “So that means Cooper’s still *Cooper*?”

“If you mean a hulking, pig-faced abomination with a knack for making dirty jokes, then yes.”

“Son of a bitch.”

“Aw he’s a big sweetheart if you look under all that filth.”

“I need to get you to Frank, like, right now. Come on. We’re nearly there.”

The Whore’s Head Inn, though still under construction, was the nicest establishment in this otherwise seedy part of town. While the surrounding buildings seemed to be made out of cannibalized scraps from former buildings, wagons, and hammer-flattened pieces of armor held together with ropes, the reconstruction of the Whore’s Head Inn appeared much more organized, and was being done with freshly cut timber.

Some sections of the building were closer to completion than others, with walls standing on their own. These were covered with

temporary canvas roofs. Under one such roof, a tiny, bearded man, like a young Professor Goosewaddle in brown, dusty overalls, oversaw the construction.

"You two!" the bearded man shouted at two dwarves. They were arguing about the placement of a crossbeam on a piece of free-standing wall while standing directly in the path of two elves on horseback carrying a load of lumber between their horses. "Get that partition out of the way!"

"Come on, guys," said one of the elves. "The duration on these Mount spells is about to –" His horse disappeared from underneath him, landing him on the ground and spilling all of the wood on top of him. The other elf hopped off of his horse just before it, too, vanished into thin air.

"Jesus Christ," said the little bearded man. He pointed to the wood-buried elf and shouted at the two dwarves. "Go help him."

"Frank!" Stuart called out.

The little bearded man looked over from his platform. "Stu! Did you find the putty?"

"No," said Stuart. "But I found something better." He opened his arms, presenting Stacy like she was the prize behind door number three.

Frank looked at him doubtfully. "Is she a carpenter?"

"No," said Stuart, lowering his arms. "She's one of *us*. She's only just arrived."

Frank frowned and scratched under his beard. "So Mordred's already back at it." He shrugged. "Well, miss, if you want a place to sleep tonight, you'd best grab a hammer and start building one."

"She's got some things to say to you… *in private*."

The two dwarves stopped and looked at Stacy.

"Quit your gawking!" said Frank. "I want the southwest corner finished today so we can start working on a real roof." He climbed down a rope ladder like a crippled spider monkey. Once on the ground, he looked much less ridiculous. "Come on downstairs."

"Just so you know," said Stuart. "She has reason to believe that the Horsemen might come looking for her here."

"They won't attack us again, not while Mordred's holding their leashes. But just in case, get some archers to spread out on the walls, and some rogues to hide behind partitions. If they show up and try anything, orders are to hit the wizard first with everything we've got." He looked up at the elf who was standing behind a badly charred, but still functional, bar. "Tony the Elf. A beer for me, if you please." He turned to face Stacy. "And for our newest member…?"

"Stacy," said Stacy. "And yes, please."

Frank accepted the two beers and handed one to Stacy. "Normally

I'd serve this to you cold, but if you're being followed by the Horsemen, we can't afford to waste even a zero level spell."

"This is fine," said Stacy. "Thank you."

Tony the Elf opened a false pantry that led to a staircase leading underground. Stacy followed Frank down the stairs. The dimly lit room at the bottom smelled like B.O. Stacy coughed.

"Oh yeah," said Frank. "Sorry about that. I don't even notice it anymore. Most everyone sleeps down here since the place got burned down. The stink is part of the reason we're in such a hurry to rebuild."

"It's okay," Stacy lied. She gulped down a swig of beer, hoping there was enough in the glass to last through their conversation.

Frank sat on a crate next to a larger crate, and invited Stacy to pull up a crate of her own, which she did.

"So what's this urgent news you've got to tell me?" asked Frank.

"I'm not sure where to start," said Stacy, wishing Frank hadn't sent Stuart away. Was Frank more interested in the Horsemen, or the fact that she knew Tim and the guys, or –

Frank cocked an eyebrow, looking just past her. "Why don't you start with where you got that fancy sword on your back?"

Stacy unsheathed the sword and placed it on the large crate between them. As gently as she set it down, the charcoal gray steel blade still managed to shave a few curls of wood off the crate. "I stole it from the Horsemen."

Frank's eyes went wide. "Sweet mother of Jesus. Is that what I think it is?"

"What do you think it is?"

"I've never actually seen one," said Frank. "Is this a vorpal sword?"

"I think that's what Stuart called it," said Stacy. "Something that started with a V."

"Well no wonder they're after you," said Frank.

"I don't think so," said Stacy. "They probably didn't even notice it's gone. They've got a barrel full of them."

Frank swallowed hard. "They've got a *what*?"

Stacy decided it would be best to come clean about the other weapon she stole. If Frank could put it in the hands of someone who could keep her safe from those Horsemen, then it would be a lot more useful than it was just sitting in her weird, magical bag.

"That's not all I stole," said Stacy. She plopped the bag down next to the top side of the sword, so as not to accidentally slice it open.

"If that bag's full of diamonds, we might be able to buy all our tickets back home."

"Sorry," said Stacy. She put her hand in the bag. "Um… weapon thing?" When she felt the cool, steel handle in her grasp, she pulled out the weapon thing.

“And a Bag of Holding to boot,” said Frank. “Now what’s that you’ve got there? A mace?”

“Among other things,” said Stacy. She pushed the first button on the handle, causing the flaming sword to spring out.

“Well that *is* impressive,” said Frank.

There was more than one button on the shaft. Stacy hadn’t given Scott a chance to demonstrate all of this thing’s options. She pushed the second and third buttons and discovered that the weapon had axe and spear functions as well. The fourth button made the weapon transform into a ladder which extended to both ends of the room, where it was wedged into place until Stacy pushed the fifth button, which retracted it. When she pressed the sixth button, the weapon jerked her arm toward a random section of wall. *What the hell?*

“North,” said Frank. “That last button must be a compass.”

“That’s kind of anticlimactic after the flame sword.”

“So that’s what they’re after,” said Frank. “That presents quite a dilemma. Do we keep it to defend ourselves with? Do we see how much it’s worth, and try to buy a few of us safe passage home? Or do we give it back and hope they don’t kill us all?”

“Keep it,” said Stacy. Her answer was abrupt and firm.

“You seem very sure of yourself.”

“They’re not after the weapon,” said Stacy. “I mean, that War guy was really excited about having it, but they’ve got more weapons than they know what to do with. They’re after me.”

“What do they want with you?” asked Frank.

Stacy shivered. “I don’t even want to think about that. But they’re acting under Mordred’s orders. I went out on a date with Mordred, and he’s sort of… I don’t know… claimed me as his queen or something.”

“You went out on a date with Mordred?” asked Frank. “Do you have some crippling self-esteem issues?”

“No,” said Stacy. “And that leads me to why your *buying tickets home* option isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

Frank raised his eyebrows, inviting her to elaborate.

“I’m assuming you know Tim and Julian and Dave and Cooper,” said Stacy.

“*You* know them?”

“Yeah. I kinda just left them.”

“Well hot damn!” said Frank. “How are they getting along back in the real world?”

“Not so good,” said Stacy. “They teleported over there okay, but they didn’t change back into humans. They’re still… Julian’s still an elf. Tim’s still a midget. Dave’s still a stockier midget. And Cooper’s still…”

“Cooper?” said Frank.

“Yeah.”

“Well shit. One of our guys guessed that might happen. It makes sense. A teleportation spell does nothing to change who you are. It just moves you as you are. We still held out hope though. It’s all we had.” He slammed a fist down on the big crate. “And now we don’t even have that anymore.”

“You might,” said Stacy. “Tim and the guys are going after Mordred right now. Once they get their hands on the magic dice… Well, who knows?”

Frank drummed his fingers on the crate. “If they succeed, it should only be a matter of minutes or hours.” He stood up and started toward the stairs. “We’ve got to get everybody out of here. If we can all split up and stay on the run for a while, we might be able to survive this without it coming to a –”

The door at the top of the stairs flew open. Tony the Elf stood at the top of the staircase.

“They’re coming.”

“Well shit,” said Frank. He turned back to Stacy. “Stay here and keep your eyes closed.”

“What for?”

“They either know you’re here, or they’re just hoping you might have turned up here. If it’s the latter, then we can deny ever having seen you. If it’s the former, then they probably used a Scrying spell. If they use it again, they won’t be able to see your surroundings if you have your eyes closed.”

“What if they’re using it right now?”

“Well then I guess we’re fucked.”

Chapter 29

Dave, Randy, Professor Goosewaddle, and Butterbean sat in the back of Dennis's squad car. Chaz sat in the passenger's seat with Tim on his lap. Nobody relished the idea of sitting next to Cooper, and Butterbean growled whenever Katherine came too close, so the two of them resorted back to their previous method of overland travel, and Tim just hoped that they wouldn't be intercepted by any low-flying aircraft.

Tim kept Dennis's gun in a dagger sheath under his vest. He didn't have to actually point it at Dennis. The fact that he had it, combined with the fact that he'd already removed Dennis's testicles, not to mention whatever promise Chaz had made about him getting them back, should be enough to keep Dennis in line.

"Can't we go any faster?" said Tim. "This is a cop car. Flip on the sirens and punch it."

"Not a good idea," said Dennis, his voice noticeably higher than it had been earlier in the day. He coughed and tried to force it deeper. "Not unless you want to get some more cops in on the action. But then, you're the feller with the gun." He reached over and kept his hand hovered over a button on the car's control panel.

"No, you're right," said Tim. It was interesting that Dennis had offered the warning. He could have easily followed Tim's directions and surrounded himself with a dozen cops if he'd wanted to. The poor bastard must really believe he's going to magically grow himself a new pair of balls. Maybe it wasn't so far-fetched. A Restore spell might do it.

No, no, stop! He couldn't let himself get distracted by Dennis's junk. He had Mordred's junk to think about. "It would just be nice if we could get there before Mordred finishes jerking off."

"We might," said Dave. "I don't think he's having an 'I-just-got-an-unexpected-five-minutes-alone quickie. This is a special night for him, and he'll probably want to make it last. Maybe hold out for a girl who looks like Stacy."

"Hey!" said Tim, unsure why. Dave was probably right.

"I like to bang out a quick one real fast," said Randy. "Then I take it nice and slow-like with round two."

Tim closed his eyes and exhaled, trying to block the mental image of Randy masturbating. "Thank you for sharing that, Randy."

"I'm just sayin'. Mordred might be doin' the same thing."

"I used to like to do it in front of the mirror," said Chaz. "I haven't tried it in this body yet, though."

"How the fuck is that relevant?" asked Tim, scooting forward a bit

on Chaz's lap.

"I thought we were sharing jerk-off stories. You know, like bonding and shit."

"Ew," said Tim. "No."

"Could you stop squirming around?" asked Chaz. "I'm not gay or nothin', but you might make this a very awkward trip soon if you don't sit still."

Dennis sniffled. His eyes were glossy.

As if Tim didn't have enough to worry about with trying to catch Mordred and trying to keep Chaz from popping a boner in his ass. "Dude, are you crying?"

"I'm sorry!" Dennis sobbed. "All… this… talk… about…" He broke down in a series of sobs before getting control of his speech again. "And… I… can't…"

"Get your shit together man," said Tim. "When we catch Mordred, you'll be spraying jizz all over the tin walls of your trailer in no time."

Dennis brought his crying down to a series of sniffles. "You know what? You are not a nice person."

"You tried to rape me."

"Oh and how long are you going to keep playing the same card?"

"That only happened this morning!"

"Dennis is right," said Randy. "Even Stacy said so."

Tim turned around and looked at Randy through the protective barrier between the front and back seats. "What did she say?"

"She said you was a mean-spirited, angry little man."

"She said that?"

Dennis gulped back his sobs. "Uh-huh." He looked very satisfied with himself.

"She said it weren't right of you to take all my Slim Jims like you done," said Randy.

"I said I was sorry!"

Dennis wiped a lingering tear from his eye and grinned. "She told me that she'd rather date a pig than a jerk like you."

"Bullshit!" said Tim. "She didn't say that."

"Oh yes she did!" said Dennis.

"When?"

"When y'all was havin' *cyber*-sex with Mordred."

"We weren't having cyber-sex with Mordred!" said Tim. "Who even says *cyber-sex* anymore?"

"What is this *sibersex*?" asked Professor Goosewaddle.

"You were there, Professor," said Tim. "Do you remember hearing Stacy say anything like that?"

"I recall no mention of *sibersex*."

"Face it, Tim," said Dave. "You do tend to be a little moody."

“Fuck you, Dave!” said Tim. “Really? You’re going to side with the two pedophiles?”

“That boy had an *I.D.*!” said Randy.

“And I’ve changed!” said Dennis. He started crying again.

“I know you’ve changed,” said Tim with mock sympathy. “I changed you. And if you don’t stop blubbering like a little bitch, I’ll change you some more.”

“All I’m saying,” said Dave, “is that if you’re interested in Stacy, you might want to try being a little nicer to people.”

“And all I’m saying,” said Tim, “is shut the fuck up.”

“What *is* this place?” asked Professor Goosewaddle, his voice filled with awe. He was leaning forward in his seat, face pressed up against the barrier between the front and rear seats of the car, staring through the front windshield.

Tim looked ahead. “Oh good. We’re here. That’s the Beauregard, Professor. Hopefully it’s the last stop on our tour.”

“It’s magnificent!”

Tim had to admit, even for a local, that the Beau was an impressive sight. While most of the other casinos on the coast tried to lure customers in with the best buffet, or triple points, or whatever gimmick they were running that week, the Beau was all about class. They still had their fair share of chain-smoking rednecks, but at least they put up a pretty good façade.

Dennis pulled the squad car off of the highway and into the customer parking deck. Spaces were available from the third tier, but Tim insisted they drive all the way to the top, to be as far away from curious eyes as possible.

When Dennis parked the car, Tim hopped out and ran to the corner of the lot facing the street. He didn’t think he’d be able to spot Julian from way up here, but a dire bat carrying Drew Brees shouldn’t be too hard to spot if you were looking for it.

He stopped short just before reaching the edge, having spotted a big, black bird perched on the wall.

“Ravenus?”

The bird made no reaction. Tim remembered that Ravenus only spoke the Elven tongue. He switched to a British accent.

“’Allo Guvnor.”

The bird turned around. “Tim!”

“Where’s Julian?”

“Dunno,” said Ravenus. “He went inside the large building. Said he’d be right back, but it’s been quite a while by my reckoning.”

“I hope he didn’t try to take on Mordred by himself.”

“Not likely.” Ravenus tilted his head toward the main building. “He’d already determined that he had no idea which one of those

rooms this Mordred fellow was staying in."

"Then what the hell is he doing?"

Ravenus raised his wings. Tim guessed that's how birds shrugged.

Tim scanned the sky for dire bats. Nothing. He looked down at the ground and caught the reflection of headlights on two green eyes across the street. A wolf. As far as Tim knew, the wolf population of Biloxi was between zero and two at any given time, and one of those was trapped in a magical bag.

The wolf turned its head back and forth, sniffing the air until it settled roughly in Tim's direction. Katherine was trying to find him.

Tim whistled, and the wolf immediately looked up at him. It nodded and ducked further back into the bushes until it was out of sight. A second later, Katherine stood up. Only Katherine. Where the hell was Cooper? Why couldn't anyone just be where the fuck they were supposed to be for once?

Katherine waited for a gap in the traffic and darted across the street. Damn, she was fast. Tim expected her to run up the ramps the way a car would do, but instead she scaled the wall like goddamn Spiderman. She climbed nearly as fast as she ran.

"I didn't know you could do that," said Tim, once Katherine hopped over the wall onto the top tier of the parking deck.

"I didn't either," said Katherine. "But when I saw the wall, I felt like I might be able to. Pretty cool, eh?"

"What happened to Cooper?"

Katherine pulled out the Bag of Holding. "Quarterback sacked."

"Are you fucking crazy?" asked Tim. "There's a vampire in there!"

"He said he'd be okay."

"What the fuck does he know?" said Tim. "He's dumb as shit! Hurry up, get him out of there!"

Katherine reached into the bag. "Cooper."

The Bag of Holding vomited Cooper on his back onto the concrete floor. His jersey was ripped across the front and his pants had a small tear down the left leg, but he didn't look as bad as he might have.

"Are you okay?" asked Tim.

"Never better," said Cooper, breathing heavily as he got to his feet.

"How's Ginfizzle?"

Cooper snorted. "He's pissed."

"Did he attack you?"

"Of course he did."

"You don't look too bad," said Tim. "Isn't he still really strong?"

"I guess," said Cooper. "But he's still a lot smaller than me. He was pretty easy to throw around."

Tim remembered Cooper throwing him around inside the Bag of Holding. "That makes sense. When you're floating around in a void,

your strength is going to be less important than your mass." Tim had struggled through high school physics, but what he was saying right now made perfect sense to him. He was rocking that 17 Intelligence score.

Cooper walked over to Dennis's squad car. "Either of you pedos got any smokes?"

Katherine watched Cooper walk to the other group, then turned to Ravenus. "Where's Julian?" Her fake British accent was grating to Tim's ears.

"He's gone inside," said Ravenus.

Katherine nodded. "He's probably gone in to charm Mordred's whereabouts out of the concierge."

"I don't think so, Miss Katherine," said Ravenus. "He told me quite specifically that they wouldn't release that information to a person… How did he put it? *Off the street?*"

"Bullshit," said Katherine. She jumped over the wall of the parking deck.

"Katherine!" shouted Tim. He poked his head between the bars just in time to see her turn into a small bat and flap down to the side of the main building. "She's having too much fun with that."

Once safely on the ground, Katherine took her normal form and strode around to the front of the building and through the main doors.

"Dude," said Cooper. He looked a little off-balance and spacey. "Where'd Katherine go?"

"Who the fuck knows?" said Tim.

"Professor Goosewaddle is passing around his pipe behind Dennis's car if you're interested. I don't know what it is, but it's some pretty good shit."

"You assholes are getting *stoned*?" said Tim. "Do I really need to remind you of the gravity of this situation?"

"Man, don't start talking physics again," said Cooper. "I'm high as fuck."

Tim stomped across the parking lot to the other side of the police car. Chaz, Randy, Dennis, Dave, and Professor Goosewaddle were sitting in a circle passing around a pipe.

"Come on, man," Dave said to Chaz, who had his lute in his lap. "Play *Holly Holy*."

"Oh, I like that song," said Dennis.

"No way, man," said Chaz. "I'm sick of it."

"Aw come on!" said Randy. "Just once."

"What the shit is going on here?" asked Tim.

"TIM!" shouted Dave, Chaz, Dennis, and Randy in unison. Dave followed with a "Wasssup!"

"Professor," said Tim. "What are you guys smoking?"

“It’s just a bit of concentrated merrythistle,” said Professor Goosewaddle. “Your friends don’t seem to have a very high tolerance for it.”

“That’s because they’ve never fucking had it before.”

“Oh dear.”

Chaz strummed the strings on his lute. “HOOOOLLLLLY HO-“

Tim slapped him in the back of the head. “Knock it off!”

“Chill out, man,” said Dave. He lazily blew a cloud of smoke in Tim’s direction. “Everything’s cool, brah.”

“Everything is most certainly not cool, *Dave*! Gulfport’s about to turn into a war zone, and we’re going to be the first casualties!”

Dennis pointed a stern finger at Dave. “So put that in your pipe and smoke it.”

Dave, Chaz, Randy and Dennis broke out in a fit of uncontrollable giggling. Tim wondered if this was how Mordred felt that first night at the Chicken Hut.

Tim held his hand out, palm up, to Dave. “Hand it over.”

“Right on,” said Dave, passing the pipe.

Tim tapped what was left of the merrythistle onto the pavement and slipped the pipe into the inside pocket of his vest.

“Hey!” said Chaz.

“Not cool, man,” said Dave.

“Piece of cake,” said Katherine.

Tim turned around. Katherine was standing right behind him. It was unnerving how she could just sneak up on him like that.

“You got the room number?” asked Tim.

“Are you kidding? I *dominated* that bitch. 2803.” She put her hands on her hips. “What are you losers all just sitting around for? Let’s go get Mordred.”

Chapter 30

Stacy kept her eyes shut tight as she felt her way slowly up the staircase. She might not be able to see what was going on, but she could at least listen in. If the Horsemen were going to search down here for her, they'd be able to find her at the bottom of the staircase just as easily as they would at the top.

"Everybody just stay calm," said Frank. "Spread out a bit, and keep your weapons visible but not drawn. Show solidarity, but no fear. Let me do the talking."

Nobody argued with Frank. His people respected him. There followed a few minutes of tense silence. The voice that broke it sent a shiver through Stacy.

"Frank, it's been too long." It was the pale one. If Stacy ever slept again, she would have nightmares about his voice. When he spoke, it felt like he was licking her soul.

"Nathan," said Frank in a very no-nonsense voice.

"You will address him as Death!" said the big one.

"Now now, Pestilence," said Nathan, or Death, or whoever the hell he was. "We're not here to fight or argue. We're on a *rescue* mission."

"You're not supposed to come within a mile of this place," said Frank. "Mordred gave us his word."

"We are here on Mordred's behalf," said Nathan. "We believe you have something of his, and we are simply here to get it back."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Frank. "We have nothing of his."

"Let's not play games, Frank. We know the girl is here. War saw her here with a Scrying spell."

"That's right!" said War, his words still a little slurred. "And I want my Rod of Lordly Might!"

"War, please," said Nathan. "What'll it be, Frank? You've done such a nice job rebuilding this place. It would be a pity to have to tear down each wall until we find her."

"There was a girl here," said Frank. "But she left, and she didn't say where she was going. She said she didn't want to put the rest of us in any danger."

Gee thanks, Frank. Now Stacy felt like a big bitch for not doing what Frank just said she did.

"He lies!" said the skinny one. "His words stink of deception. I have fifteen ranks in Sense Motive!"

"Take it easy, Famine," said Nathan. "It's only natural for them to want to try to deceive us. They think we're dangerous, and that they need to protect her from us."

The big one, the one called Pestilence, snorted. “They can’t even protect themselves.”

Several bows creaked from different directions.

“Hold your fire!” said Frank. “I’m telling you, she’s gone. If you don’t believe me, you can use another Scrying spell and see for yourself.” He raised his voice. “Everybody hold your fire. I am going to allow the wizard to cast a Scrying spell. Do NOT shoot him.” His raised voice was no doubt as much for Stacy’s benefit as it was for the archers. She was on. She put her hands over her eyes, just to make sure that as little light as possible got in.

“Interesting,” said Nathan. “I’ll play along. War, did you bring another Scrying scroll?”

“Yeah,” said Scott. He mumbled some words that Stacy couldn’t understand. “It’s… something’s wrong,” he said. “It’s not working right.”

“What do you mean, *it’s not working right*?” said Famine. “Can you see anything or not?”

“I only see darkness,” said Scott. “And everything is echo-y.”

“Echo-y?” said Nathan.

“Yeah,” said Scott. “Your voices, *my* voice. It’s like we’re talking in a cave.”

“It’s because you’re drunk!” said Pestilence.

“Ow!” said Scott. “Hey, stop it!”

“That’s how she escaped in the first place, you idiot!”

“Come on, man. Stop it. That hurts!”

“You only had one job.”

“Cut it out!”

“Pestilence,” said Nathan in a warning tone.

“You couldn’t even babysit a stupid little bitch.”

“Eric!” said Nathan. “That’s enough!”

The commotion stopped abruptly. Whatever Eric had been doing to Scott, he stopped now.

“War,” Nathan spoke calmly again. “Go take some time to clear your mind. I’ll signal you to return.”

A minute of silence passed, then Nathan spoke again.

“So what’s it gonna be, Frank? Are we gonna do this the easy way or the hard way?” That line sounded rehearsed, but Nathan still wasn’t quite able to pull it off.

“What are you talking about?” said Frank. “I told you she’s not here. It’s not my fault your wizard’s a useless drunk.”

“It’s true,” Nathan conceded. “Scott’s taste for the Devil’s Water often keeps him from achieving all he otherwise might, but I assure you his magic is sound. After all, he successfully used the same spell only a short while ago, which is what led us here. If anything, he’s

more sober now than he was then."

"So what are you saying?" asked Pestilence. "She's hiding in a cave?"

"No, Eric," said Nathan. He sounded annoyed that the big guy wasn't keeping up. "If she was in a cave, Scott wouldn't have heard our voices echoing. The echoing sound came from him hearing our voices with his own ears as well as the ears of someone who is *very... close... by*."

Shit.

"So she's hanging around somewhere with her eyes closed?" Nathan continued. "Is that really the best you could do, Frank?"

"We didn't have a lot of time to plan."

"Disappointing."

"We're not giving up the girl."

"I understand you want to protect her," said Nathan. "And that's very noble. But I can assure you she is much safer under our protection than under yours."

"She's not going anywhere," said Frank. "Take one more step, and I make you the archers' primary target."

"Pah!" said Nathan. "Save your arrows. Our armor has enough buffs to stop a Howitzer. Well, that's true for all of us except Scott. But then, wouldn't you know, he's way up there. How high do you think you can fire those arrows?"

"One of us has a vorpal sword," said Frank. "Stacy brought it back from your place. Are you willing to risk losing your head?" It was a sad, desperate last ditch effort of a threat.

"Ha!" said Nathan. "You go ahead and keep the vorpal sword. We've got a dozen of them. But I'm afraid Scott's going to want his Rod of Lordly Might back."

"Tell him to come down here and get it."

"No no," said Nathan. "I'm afraid Scott is going to have to stay right where he is for now. You see, we didn't have much time to plan either. But we made do. I can give him the blue signal or the red signal. Hand over the girl, and I'll give him the blue signal. He'll come down and pick us up, and we'll all be on our way. Try my patience any further and… Well let's just say that Fireball has a range of four hundred feet, and your precious tavern currently lacks a roof."

"You wouldn't." said Frank. The desperation in his voice suggested that he knew otherwise.

"Scott's been stockpiling Fireball scrolls," said Nathan. "It's his favorite spell. I'd guess he's probably got enough scrolls to give each of you your own individual Fireball. And don't worry. Since he's leveled up, these will be much more impressive than the sad excuse for a Fireball that burnt this place to the ground last time."

Stacy had heard enough. She opened her eyes. “Stop! I’m coming out!”

“Stacy, no!” Frank did his best to sound sincere, but Stacy could tell he was relieved. She had taken the moral dilemma, and the responsibility for the lives of all his friends, off his hands.

“Thank you, Frank,” said Stacy. “You’re a brave little guy, but I can’t have you all put your lives at risk for me. Besides, Mordred isn’t going to let them hurt me.”

“That’s right, dear,” said Nathan. “You’ll be perfectly safe with us.” He was less scary when he was deliberately trying to sound evil. However insidious his voice was when he spoke normally, he only sounded silly when trying to deliver schlocky supervillian lines. He pointed a bony, white finger at the sky, and a beam of blue light shot out of it.

An arrow came out of nowhere and struck an invisible barrier about two inches away from Nathan’s black robe. The arrow disintegrated and crumbled to dust at his feet. He glared annoyingly at Frank.

“I said hold your fire!” Frank shouted. “That’s just a signal flare!”

“Sorry!” said a Tim-like person from up on one of the walls. “My bad!”

The magical light exploded into a blue burst of fireworks, and Scott began to descend on the flying carpet.

Frank crossed his arms. He looked defeated. “I’m sorry we couldn’t do more.”

“You did all you could,” said Stacy. “Just hang on. *Time* heals all wounds.” She hoped Frank understood what she was getting at with her ill-fitted-to-the-situation cliché. *Just wait, Frank. The guys back home are going to set things right.*

Frank nodded. “Time.”

As Scott’s carpet got closer, Pestilence approached Stacy with the bag to cover her head.

“Is the bag really necessary guys?” asked Stacy. “There are only two places in this world that I know the location of, and one of them is your place.”

Pestilence grunted through his piggy nostrils. “The bag is so we don’t have to look at your ugly face.” He thrust it down roughly over her head.

Stacy waited for the carpet in silent darkness, passing the time by actively abstaining from pointing out the irony in what he’d just said.

Chapter 31

"Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight." Tim stopped counting once he reached the top floor. He hopped down off the wall of the parking deck and looked at the key card in his hand. "Twenty-eight-o-three. That puts him on the top floor."

"Penthouse suite," said Katherine. "I got invited to a party up there once. Those are some nice rooms."

"No doubt pretty expensive too," said Tim. "He's not just hiding out from us. He's planning to unleash those four pricks on Biloxi tonight."

"It's kinda lame, when you think about it," said Katherine.

"What's that?"

"Why would anyone want to take over the Gulfport-Biloxi area? Why not take over New York or Paris or something?"

"Maybe he wants to start small, just to get a feel for it, and hope the rest of the world doesn't notice."

"Smart move on his part."

"And there's the casinos," said Tim. "If he can take down the Beauregard, he'll have the cash to get started on some more serious domination."

Katherine bit her lower lip. "Shit."

"We can't let that happen."

"Big words, little brother," said Katherine. "When did you get all of this hometown pride?"

"I don't give a shit about this town," said Tim. "When Mordred brings those assholes back here, killing us is going to be their first priority."

"I guess you're right. Do you have a plan for getting in?"

"We'll never make it through the lobby without arousing suspicion looking the way we do, not to mention the fact that all of these assholes are stoned as shit."

"So if we can't go through the lobby…"

Tim looked up at the towering building and already regretted what he was about to say. "We go in through the window."

"You want me to ferry you guys up there one at a time?" asked Katherine. "Won't that diminish the element of surprise?"

"No," said Tim. "We all go in at the same time." He picked up the Bag of Holding. "Do you still have that gun that you and Cooper shot up the Olive Garden with?"

"No," said Katherine. "I threw it away."

"Shit." Tim was reluctant to part with the gun he had on him. If they were too late, he wanted to put a few holes in those Horse-fuckers before they killed him.

"I don't know how much that's going to help you against Ginfizzle anyway," said Katherine. "Besides, if you miss, the bullet's only going to fly by in random directions until it hits somebody."

"It's not for Ginfizzle," said Tim. "I think the seven of us will be able to handle him okay."

"Then what do you need with a gun? Also, I think you miscounted."

"I didn't count Cooper."

"Why not?"

"Hold that thought." Tim walked back to the group. "Do we still have any guns?"

Chaz stopped strumming his lute. "There's a shotgun in the trunk of the car."

"Perfect," said Tim, rubbing his hands together and trying to spot a flaw in his plan. *No. No time for thinking.* "Okay guys, hop in the bag." He held open the Bag of Holding."

"I beg your pardon?" said Dennis.

Randy giggled. "I don't think we's all gonna fit in there."

"Sure we will," said Dave. "Check this out. You're gonna love it." His voice was uncharacteristically enthusiastic. Maybe that merrythistle was good for something after all. He stood up, waddled over, stepped into the bag, and appeared to sink into the pavement.

"God*damn*!" said Dennis.

"What was in that stuff we was smokin', Professor?"

"Come on, guys," said Tim. "Hurry it up. Dave's alone in there with a vampire and a limited amount of air. We've got to do this quickly."

Randy and Dennis looked at one another doubtfully.

Chaz hopped up and looked Tim in the face. "First in, first out. I almost suffocated last time."

"You got it," said Tim, having absolutely no intention of keeping that promise. Chaz stepped into the bag.

"Me next!" said Cooper.

"No," said Tim. "I need you for something else."

Cooper folded his arms and sulked. "This is bullshit."

Tim looked at Randy and Dennis. "Let's go, guys."

"I don't wanna go in the bag," said Randy.

Dennis hugged Randy's arm. "I'm scared."

Tim sighed. "We don't have time for this. Cooper?"

Cooper grabbed Dennis by the arms, lifted him off the ground, and shoved him headfirst into the bag. He looked at Randy. "Get in the fucking bag."

"Okay okay," said Randy. He dipped a toe tentatively inside. "I don't feel nothin'."

"Can you feel this?" said Cooper, shoving Randy in the back.

"Wha!" said Randy, falling into the bag. He got stuck halfway, as

his gut tested the limits of the bag's opening. He lifted the bottom of the bag off the pavement, revealing nothing underneath. "Where the hell are my legs?"

"Suck in the gut," said Cooper, and shoved him the rest of the way through.

"Cooper," said Tim. "Go get Butterbean out of the car."

While Cooper was retrieving the injured wolf, Tim turned to Professor Goosewaddle. "Professor?"

"I'm sorry," said Professor Goosewaddle. "I'm not getting into a Bag of Holding. That's just plain ludicrous. You young people have no appreciation for the dangerous aspects of magic."

"I've got plenty appreciation for the dangerous aspects of magic," said Tim. "That's why I'm doing this."

"Butterbean!" said Katherine, as Cooper approached with her Animal Companion. Butterbean growled at her. At least he was sounding healthier. "You take care of him in there."

"I will," said Tim. "Come on, Professor. I need you to get in the bag."

"To what end?" said Professor Goosewaddle.

"So that Katherine can turn into a bat and carry us all up to the room Mordred is staying in."

Professor Goosewaddle laughed. "Is that all? I'll just fly alongside her." He waved his hands and spoke an incantation. A second later, he was zipping through the air like Peter Pan.

"Okay then," said Tim. "That'll do." He turned to Cooper. "All right, Cooper. Get the shotgun out of Dennis's trunk. The keys are –"

Cooper punched the keyhole of the police car's trunk repeatedly until it gave up and opened.

"—in the ignition."

"Now what?" said Cooper, looking pretty badass in a football uniform and brandishing a police-issue shotgun.

"Here's the plan," said Tim. "Those windows are likely to be pretty strong, to prevent people who've lost all their money from jumping through them. If Katherine can't punch through the glass, use the shotgun."

"Fuck yes!" said Cooper.

"We're not going to have much air left," said Tim. "So once you're in there, start pulling us out. If you see the dice, grab them. Just make sure Mordred doesn't get away again."

"Got it," said Cooper.

"Okay," said Tim. "Good luck, and don't fuck this up." He stepped into the bag.

Chapter 32

Julian had gotten bored with small-stakes roulette, and decided to take the dealer's advice to move on to a higher limit table. No physical barrier separated the high limit area from the rest of the casino, but it felt like a different world. The lights were dimmer, the carpet softer, the lingering smoke in the air was less from cigarettes, and more from cigars. It wasn't a place for a pizza delivery guy, or most of the riff-raff that had followed him over here. He was quickly drawing suspicion with the new dealer.

"I don't know how he's doing it," the dealer said to the large, blue-suited man to his left. Judging by the earpiece and the muscles threatening to burst through the fabric of his suit, Julian guessed he was casino security. They were whispering, but not a word of it got past Julian's elf ears. "He's either the luckiest sonofabitch this side of the Mississipi, or –"

"Nobody's that lucky. He's cheating."

"But how? He's not even picking the numbers himself."

"Let me see."

Julian felt he might be pushing his luck. Weren't these the guys in the movies who took cheaters in the back room and beat the shit out of them? But fuck it. They had nothing on him. What were they going to accuse him of? Sorcery? Ha! He wouldn't be here much longer anyway. He was down to his last zero-level spell, and his ability to remain focused was being compromised by the server who kept pouring drinks down his throat. She had also followed him to the high limit table, as he was tipping her two hundred dollars for every drink she brought him. Consequently, the drinks were coming more and more frequently, and now this big asshole in a suit was giving him the stink eye, and fucking racists, and shit he was fucked up. Wasn't there something he was supposed to be doing? *Keep your mind on the roulette ball, or the room will start spinning again.*

"Sir?" said the dealer. "Who's it going to be this time?"

"Huh?" said Julian. "Oh right." He scanned the crowd of eager faces. They were all staring at him, some of them raising their hands. One of them was wearing a white dress and a tiara that said *Bachelorette*. That was hot. "You're pretty. Can I buy you a drink?"

"Sir?" the dealer said a little more curtly.

"Oh yeah," said Julian. "Pick a number, Sugarbuns."

The girl in the white dress cleared her throat. "Since Jeremy and I have been together for *three* years…"

"Aaaaaaaawwwwwwww!" said the three girls in her entourage.

Shit. This chick's got a boyfriend?

"And since we'll be getting married in *three* days…"

"Yay!" said the entourage.

You can forget about that drink, bitch.

"And since I'm here with my *three* best friends…"

"Aaaaaaaaawwwwwwwww!"

Jesus Christ, enough already. The stage is over there, lady. Even the dealer and the security guy were rolling their eyes at this point.

"And since –"

"And since we don't want to be here for *three* goddamn hours," said Julian. He placed a stack of hundred dollar chips on three. "My bet is three."

Everyone at the table placed their bets on three. Not a single chip was laid down on any other square. The piles of chips looked like a city in the desert. *Vegas*.

The dealer spun the wheel.

"Come on, three!" said the young bride-to-be.

"Oh yeah!" shouted the old woman who had provided Julian with his first stack of chips. "Mama needs a new pair of boobs!" She had had her fair share of drinks as well.

"Lori, it's Dad," said a forty-something year old man into his cell phone. He gripped his fanny pack excitedly. "Something's come up, and… well pack your bags. Mom and I are sending you to Yale!" The excited screaming coming out of the phone spread warmth in Julian's heart. Well, that and the booze.

Speaking of which, he was just about done with his –

"Buttery Nipple?" The serving girl tapped Julian on the shoulder, startling the shit out of him.

"Wha! Oh, thank you." Julian accepted the sweet, caramel-colored drink and grabbed a pile of chips for the server without looking to see what denominations they were. She was a nice girl, with nice, big, perky boobies. She deserved – *Oh shit, the ball!*

Julian whirled around to look at the roulette wheel. His mental tether was completely severed. He strained to remember the incantation. It was so simple. Just a zero-level spell. But it was no use. He was completely tapped out of magic for the day.

The ball bounced all over the place. Julian looked at the old woman. She had helped him get started, and now he was costing her a new pair of breasts. He looked at Lori's mother. Lori wouldn't be going to Yale after all. He looked at the bachelorette. She had perky boobies too.

There was still a chance the ball might land on three. That's what the game was all about, right? The ball bounced less erratically as the wheel slowed down.

Come on, three! Come on, three! Come on, three!

"Twenty-one!" announced the dealer. Julian stared gloomily at the ball as it revolved more and more slowly around the center axle. He was afraid to look up. The crowd at the table was dead silent, except for Lori's voice on her dad's cell phone. "Dad? Dad? Are you still there? Dad, what's wrong?"

Julian sucked back his Buttery Nipple and mustered up the courage to look up. Everyone stared back at him, mouths hanging ajar.

"What have I done?" said Lori's dad, tears welling up in his eyes.

"I'm so sorry," said Julian. He shoved a pile of chips his way. "Send your kid to Yale."

The older woman lit up another cigarette, not appearing to give much of a shit about how much money she'd just lost, but it didn't alleviate Julian's feelings of guilt. He shoved a smaller pile of chips to her. "Go get yourself some new boobs."

The bachelorette glared at Julian, her hands on her hips. Her entourage stood behind her in a show of solidarity.

"What?" shouted Julian defensively. "I owe you *nothing*, you cockteasing whore!"

The young women looked at one another, their eyes and mouths gaping wide open like they were four fish.

"Okay," said the security guy. "That's enough. Sir, I'm going to have to escort you off the premises."

"Oh what?" Julian had been waiting for this. He spoke loudly, addressing the surrounding crowd more than the large man grabbing him by the arm. "A guy wins a little cash at your casino, and so you boot him out? Tell me that's not a rigged system!" People turned around in their slot-machine stools to look as Julian was dragged past them. "Careful you don't win anything!" he shouted. "They'll throw your ass out!"

"Sir!" The security guy spun Julian around and spoke very firmly to him. "You're not being thrown out for winning. You're being thrown out for being drunk and disorderly."

"Those were complimentary drinks!" said Julian, poking the man in his huge chest. "*You* did this to me! *You* made me drunken dis—" He vomited down the front of the man's blue suit. A torrent of Buttery Nipple gushed out of his mouth.

"For the love of –" He pressed his finger against his earpiece. "Yes sir, I'll be right there." He called out to a couple of younger guys in identical blue suits. "Todd! Clayton!"

The two young men ran over. "Yes sir!"

"I've got a situation in the Penthouse. Get this idiot the fuck out of here for me, would you?"

"I'm a guest here," said Julian. His words even sounded slurred to himself. "And I don't think that's a very professional way to address a

_”

The security guy grabbed Julian by the throat. “You haven’t seen unprofessional, son. You set foot in the Beauregard again, and you’re gonna learn what unprofessional really means.”

Chapter 33

Cooper stood on the wall of the top tier of the parking deck with bat-Katherine perched on his shoulders and flapping her wings just hard enough to maintain her position. The Beauregard stood huge and brightly lit against night sky in front of him. He held the Bag of Holding in one hand and Dennis's shotgun in the other. "You ready, Professor?"

Professor Goosewaddle hovered next to Cooper and shrugged. "I can't rightly say. I'm still not one hundred percent certain who this Mordred character is and why we are hunting him."

"Good enough for me." Cooper squatted down and launched himself out into the open air. "Drew Breeeeeees!"

After a stomach-turning dip, Cooper felt the reassuring grip of Katherine's giant bat feet on his shoulders, and they began to ascend. The parking deck wasn't far from the main building, so the ascent was at a very steep angle, giving Cooper a good look into the rooms. It was mostly normal people doing boring shit. Watching TV, eating, drinking, crying. He was disappointed at how few wild, cocaine-fuelled orgies were taking place.

When they reached the top floor, Cooper knew they had the right place. There was the fat fuck himself, sprawled out naked on the bed like a beached whale, if a whale could masturbate furiously to shitty, eighties-era porn. He might have even felt sorry for interrupting if not for the fact that it was going to be so goddamn hilarious.

The plan was to try punching through the window first, but fuck that. Blasting a Beauregard penthouse window with a shotgun wasn't the sort of opportunity he imagined he would get again anytime soon.

"Here goes nothin'," said Cooper. He cocked the shotgun. Katherine screeched. It was probably something about how shooting the window was only supposed to be a last resort, but he preferred to interpret it as "HELL YEAH!" He extended his arm toward the window and pulled the trigger.

The entire window turned white with spider web cracks, denying Cooper the opportunity to see Mordred's reaction. It also stubbornly continued to deny them entrance. He cocked the shotgun for a second blast, but it was empty. *Fuck. Who would have thought punching would be the last resort option?*

Cooper punched and punched, but the window wasn't budging. He beat on it with the shotgun, but it was no use. They must take suicide pretty fucking seriously at the Beauregard.

Well shit. They'd done all they could. Mordred wins another round. Cooper's friends were suffocating inside a bag hundreds of feet off the

ground. “Come on, Katherine. It’s time to call it. Fly us up to the roof.”

“Just a second,” said Professor Goosewaddle. “Let me give it a try.” He held his hands palms out toward the window and sang something that sounded like a nursery rhyme in a foreign language. Bolts of lightning flew out of his hands, coating the entire surface of the window in blue, crackling electricity. After a few seconds, the steel frame holding the window in place began to bubble and melt. Finally, the window exploded. The lightning shot into the room, catching the curtains on fire and scorching the paint on the walls. Goosewaddle ended the spell.

Katherine flew into the room. Mordred was no longer on the bed, but from the fresh brown stain on the sheets, Cooper had a pretty good idea where he’d gone. He dropped the Bag of Holding down on the bed and ran to the bathroom.

“Mordred!” Cooper shouted, banging on the bathroom door. *Fuck that.* He kicked it in. Mordred was sobbing and wadding up some toilet paper, presumably to wipe up the shit that was running down his inner thigh. *Fuck that, too.* Cooper had been shitting himself for months because of this fat asshole. He grabbed Mordred by the arm and yanked. “Get the fuck out of there.”

Cooper held the empty shotgun on Mordred as he shoved him into the bedroom, in front of the television. Mordred’s cheeks glistened with the tracks of tears as he sobbed, and his entire crotch region glistened with lube. Behind him, on the TV screen, some big-haired blonde was getting reamed from behind by a muscular dude sporting a cowboy hat and an impressive handlebar mustache.

“Dave,” said Katherine. Dave spilled out of the Bag of Holding onto the floor where the rest of the group were on their backs, gasping for air like a bunch of fish on a dock. “Did I get everyone?”

Dave raised a finger while trying to catch his breath.

“What?” said Katherine. “One more?”

Dave nodded. “Ch… Ch…Chaz,” he finally spat out.

Katherine reached into the bag once more. “Chaz!”

Chaz fell out of the bag and sucked in enough air to inflate a life raft. “Assholes!” he said as he exhaled.

“Sorry,” said Katherine. “There are so many people to keep track of.”

“You managed to remember the fucking dog.”

“Butterbean is my Animal Companion,” said Katherine. “We share a special bond.”

Butterbean growled and snarled at Katherine.

“Where are we?” said Randy. “How did we get here?”

“We’re in the penthouse of the Beauregard,” said Tim.

“It looked better in the brochure,” said Dennis.

“That’s because it wasn’t on fucking fire,” said Tim. “What the hell happened in here?”

“That glass is tough as shit,” said Cooper. “The professor had to Lightning Bolt it.”

“Ride me, Larry!” said the big-haired blonde on TV. “Ride me like a bull!”

“What the fuck are you watching?” said Cooper. “*Dallas*?”

“Cooper!” shouted Tim.

Cooper tore his gaze away from the shitty porn. Mordred had grabbed his dice bag from off the table near him.

“Um,” said Cooper. “What should I do?”

“You listen to *me*!” said Mordred. “I don’t know why you couldn’t just leave me alone. I’m sorry for what happened to you, but what’s done is done. I didn’t know you’d stay that way permanently.”

Cooper could barely hear him over the wind whipping in through the open window and flapping of sheets and burning curtains. “What?”

“You were supposed to return exactly the same as before you left,” Mordred yelled. “Back to normal, with no memories of where you’d been. I was going to let you all live, but you’ve pushed my hand.”

“Just give us the dice, Mordred,” said Tim. “Nobody has to get hurt. This can all end right now.”

“The world as you know it is about to end right now!” said Mordred. “And I’m afraid a lot of people will have to get hurt. My reign will have a messy beginning, but once I have crushed all opposition, the world will be a better place for it. Imagine a world with no poverty, no disease, no –”

“I’ve heard enough of this bullshit,” said Tim. “Katherine, dominate him!”

Katherine opened her eyes wide and glared at Mordred.

Mordred turned away and grabbed a little book off the table. He held it out toward Katherine.

Katherine hissed and turned away, shutting her eyes tight.

“What is that?” said Chaz.

“A bible,” said Tim. “Fucking Gideons.”

“It must count as a Holy Symbol,” said Dave.

“Fuck this,” said Tim. “Cooper, just shoot him.”

“Uhhh…” said Cooper. He raised the shotgun slowly at Mordred, but Tim was calling his bluff.

“If anything happens to me,” said Mordred, “the Horsemen will kill Stacy.”

“All right,” said Tim. “Cooper, stand down.”

Cooper lowered the gun. His bluff remained uncalled.

“What are you offering?” asked Tim.

"Not much," Mordred said smugly. "My reign begins tonight. The best I can offer you is a head start. If you leave now, I'll give you an hour before I summon the Horsemen to get as far away from here as you can. Force my hand, and… well, I'll just warn you that it's a very short incantation."

"And Stacy?"

"She is to be my queen."

"No good," said Tim.

"You are not in a position to bargain," said Mordred. "I need but speak the words, and my Horsemen will appear. I'm offering you a chance to live. Would you throw all of your friends' lives away over some girl?"

"That *is* kinda fucked up, dude," said Cooper.

"We want the dice," said Dave.

"Dave!" said Tim. "No! I won't sacrifice Stacy to…" He looked at Mordred, who was grinning as his penis started to perk up again. "… to that."

"You don't speak for all of us," said Dave. He turned to Mordred. "Just let us use the dice one more time, and you'll never see us again.

"Nice try," said Mordred. "You think I'm just going to hand over the keys to my revolution? You have ten seconds to leave before I bring back the Horsemen!"

"Come on, man!"

"Ten!"

"Shit," said Dave. "Well, let's go then.

"Stop," said Tim. He had that dangerous, borderline suicidal look in his eyes again. "Nobody's going anywhere."

"Nine!" said Mordred, nostrils flaring.

"Eight," said Tim, drawing the dagger from his belt.

"Tim," said Cooper. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Do you think I'm bluffing?" asked Mordred.

"You fat sack of shit," said Tim, taking a step closer to Mordred. "You never intended to bring any of us back, did you? I mean, not even from the start. You were going to keep us in that game forever, like we were fucking toys in your big ass sand box."

"You're trying one of your Hail Mary mind games again," said Mordred. "I'm not falling for it. Popsicles won't save you this time."

"My seventeen Intelligence score says otherwise."

Mordred shook his head and sneered. "You're pathetic. Seven."

Tim took a series of rapid steps toward Mordred, dagger in hand, counting with each step. "Six! Five! Four! Three!"

"Tim, no!" shouted Dave.

Mordred held the bag up over his head. "Eric, Scott, Nathan, Milton, RETURN!"

The air crackled with electricity while the room filled with bright, white light. Cooper had to avert his eyes. He held the shotgun by the barrel, hoping he'd at least get the chance to smash one of those fuckers in the face before they killed everybody.

From outside the room, someone started banging on the door. "Hotel security. Open the door!"

The electricity in the air died down as the white light started to fade, and the sound of screaming took up the slack.

The door flew open as a large man in a blue suit kicked it in. His suit was wet and brown down the front with what Cooper recognized as fresh, booze-induced vomit, and his eyes were wide with what looked more like disgust than terror. "What the hell is going on in here?"

Cooper turned to see what he was looking at. Mordred was standing nude in front of four prepubescent boys. Well, five if you counted Tim.

Mordred looked from the security person to the television, where the camera was at an odd angle, focused on a set of hairy balls slapping against ass.

"I can explain," said Mordred, taking a step back away from the traumatized children. "This isn't what it – Ow!" He hopped on one foot, having stepped on a piece of broken glass. Three hops later, he landed on a different piece of glass, lost his balance, and fell out of the open window.

Tim stared wide-eyed and open-mouthed into the night sky. "I've done it again."

Chapter 34

"You're not to set foot on Beauregard property again," said the slightly wider of the two young security personnel while shoving Julian through a service entrance on the side of the building. Julian stumbled until he was stopped by a dumpster. The clang of metal against face reverberated in his aching head.

Julian steadied himself against the dumpster and looked at the two hefty men in blue suits who stood in a rectangle of light from a sconce on the outside wall. "Oh I'll be back, all right. I'll be back to kick your asses!"

The one who had shoved him just laughed, but the smaller one's face turned foul.

"You threatenin' me, Wingding?" He took a step forward, but his partner stopped him with a hand on the shoulder. "Don't nobody threaten me. I'll kick your skinny Chow ass."

"Let it go, Matt," said the bigger guy. "What's he gonna do? Come back here and get us with his black belt?"

"That ain't the point, Darryl," said Matt. "It's a matter of –"

"I don't have a black belt," said Julian. The two casino thugs stared at him blankly. "I've got *Magic Missiles*." Julian waved his arms around to add more substance to his threat.

Of course Julian didn't really plan to come back and shoot these guys with Magic Missiles. He was neither a violent nor vengeful person. He only wanted to teach them a lesson about judging a book by its cover. From the looks on their faces, they got the message.

The smaller one frowned. "That's the saddest display I ever seen. I don't rightly feel like I can kick his ass like I was gonna."

The bigger one shook his head. "What a fucking loser."

The two of them went back inside and closed the door.

Alone with his bruised face and feelings of inadequacy, Julian skulked around to the more brightly lit front of the building. He stopped when he felt the crunch of broken glass grinding into pavement beneath his shoes. The sidewalk was glistening with tiny fragments of the stuff. Sure, it was pretty, but you'd think there'd be some safety concerns. Surely there was a better way to – "OW!"

Something small and hard hit Julian on the top of the head. It smarted like someone had thrown an acorn at him really hard, but from directly above. He looked up.

"JESUS CHRIST!" Julian shouted as three hundred and fifty pounds' worth of hairy, naked nerd came screaming down toward him. Paralyzed with fear and confusion, he instinctively dropped onto the ground in a fetal position and shut his eyes.

His next thought was that he wished his instincts had told him to move out of the way instead.

The thought after that was, *How am I having the time for all of these thoughts?* Cautiously, he opened one eye and looked up again.

There were no naked Mordreds falling toward him. It must have been some kind of hallucination. As hallucinations go, that one was pretty fucked up. What the hell was that girl mixing into those Buttery Nipples?

"Sir!" said a familiar voice.

Julian's mind was a little clearer than it had been a few seconds ago. He'd vomited up a lot of booze, and seeing Mordred naked was enough to sober up just about anyone. A mental image started to form as to who the voice belonged to.

"Ravenus?"

"Over here, sir."

Julian turned. Ravenus weighed down a branch of a nearby crepe myrtle tree.

"I was worried about you, sir," said Ravenus. "I couldn't feel your presence."

"Sorry about that," said Julian. "I was really drunk."

"And then when it came back, it was in a rush of panic."

"Yeah, I thought I saw something."

"It must have given you quite a fright, sir," said Ravenus. "Was it an owlbear?"

Julian laughed. "No, Ravenus. It wasn't an owlbear. It was the weirdest thing, though. I could have sworn I saw –" Looking back up, Julian discovered that the night sky above his head was still not completely devoid of activity.

"Drew Brees away!" shouted a football player as he leapt out of the top floor window.

Julian scrambled out of the way this time before looking up again. The football player wasn't free-falling. He was descending slowly in short bursts. When he was about a quarter of the way down, the shape of a giant bat became clear against the dark sky. *Katherine?*

When they were about three quarters of the way down, it became clear that the football player was not, in fact, Drew Brees, but Cooper in a Saints uniform.

When he was about three feet off the ground, Katherine let go of Cooper's shoulders. Cooper dropped to one knee. "Touchdown!"

Katherine morphed back into her half-elven form. "Stop goofing around, Cooper! Give me the bag!"

Cooper tossed the Bag of Holding to Katherine, who immediately started pulling people out of it.

"Hey, Coop," said Julian.

“Julian!” said Cooper, grinning through the facemask of his helmet. “Where the fuck have you been? You missed everything! Mordred just fell out of the goddamn – Wait a second… Where *is* Mordred?”

Julian tried to will the rest of his drunkenness away. It didn’t work. “Um… Where, exactly, did you expect to find Mordred?”

Cooper shrugged. “Splattered all over the sidewalk, I guess. Maybe at the bottom of a Mordred-shaped hole, if he landed in the grass.”

“Then it was real,” said Julian.

“What was real?”

“I was walking right past here, looking for you guys,” Julian lied, “when something bounced off my head.”

“Mordred?” asked Cooper.

Julian glared at Cooper, trying to determine whether the question was genuine or not. Cooper’s face gave no answer.

“No, it wasn’t Mordred. It was something small and hard, like an acorn, or a –”

“Or a die,” said Tim, picking up one of the magical black dice. He laughed shallowly and shook his head. “That lucky, lucky son of a bitch.” He stared out at the Gulf of Mexico. “Well played, Mordred. Well played.”

Chapter 35

"Where are we?" asked one of the former Horsemen.

"Who was that crazy little man who was trying to bite everybody?" asked another.

"Was that a Bag of Holding?" asked the only one of them who didn't appear to be on the brink of crying.

"I want to go home," said the chubby one who had passed the brink. Tim couldn't really tell any of the little brats apart, but he hoped that the fat one was Nathan.

"We'll take you home," said Tim. "Where do you live?" He felt the dice in his pocket. They had found six in all.

"Atlanta," said the one who seemed to still be in control of his emotions.

"Fuck," said Cooper. "That's an eight hour drive. Can't we just leave these little pricks here? They'll find their way home."

"Huddle up," said Tim. He led Cooper, Dave, Katherine, and Julian a few yards away. "These kids have a chance at a normal life."

"One of those fuckers stabbed me," said Cooper.

"But they don't know that," said Dave. "They were being manipulated by Mordred."

"Everybody at the Whore's Head was being manipulated by Mordred," said Tim. "The choice to act like giant assholes was their own."

"That's right," said Cooper.

"But having said that," Tim continued, "They are a lot younger and easier to manipulate than us. I think we have to cut them some slack for that."

"Can't we just buy them a bus ticket?" said Katherine.

"I'd rather us act like decent human beings for once," said Tim. "Julian, you wanna weigh in on this?"

Julian gave him a look like anything he said would come out as vomit instead of words. Tim knew that look well.

"Okay then," said Tim. "We're going to need another car. Whatever happened to Randy's van?"

Cooper picked his nose. "We, uh…"

"We had to ditch it on the I-10 to go after Ginfizzle on foot," said Katherine.

"We're right next to a parking deck," said Dave. "And it's not like we haven't broken six dozen other laws today. Let's just steal one. I'm sure Dennis has a slim jim in his squad car."

"Slim Jim!" said Cooper. "Snap into the spice! The beefy –"

"Shut up, Cooper," said Tim. "Do any of you know how to hotwire a

car?"

"I thought maybe you might," said Dave.

"How the hell would I know how to hotwire a car?"

"You're a rogue."

"Do I even have to point out why that's such a stupid conclusion to jump to?"

"It wasn't a conclusion," said Dave. "It was a shot in the dark. We don't have –"

"Pro…" said Julian.

"What is it?" said Tim. "Spit it out."

Julian threw up into the center of their huddle. "Okay, I'm good now."

"Was there something you wanted to say?" asked Tim.

"Professor Goosewaddle can start a car."

Dave squinted doubtfully at Julian. "How can –"

"Good enough for me," said Tim.

One more trip in the Bag of Holding brought everyone to the top tier of the parking deck. Dennis was surprisingly receptive to the idea of stealing a car, so much so that he suggested they go for something bigger. The hope for a replacement set of testicles was a powerful motivator indeed. Fifteen minutes later, they were all headed eastbound on the I-10 in a luxury RV.

Dennis took the first shift so that he could flash a badge if anyone gave them any trouble getting out of the parking lot. That proved an unnecessary precaution, but he took them as far as Mobile. Katherine took over after that, turning north on I-65, and Tim allowed himself to relax. While the kids huddled together in fear, the rest of the group helped themselves to the personal belongings of the family who owned the RV. They discovered a few bottles of expensive liquor and played rounds of Paper, Rock, Scissors to determine who would be exempt from driving duty. Chaz lost, and was therefore assigned to drive them the rest of the way to Atlanta once dawn broke.

A change of clothes was also a welcome treat. The closest thing Tim could find to fit him was a Nickelback T-shirt. *Fucking kids these days.* It was less scratchy than the rough-spun wool of his tunic, so he wore it inside out. He kept his character's vest, though. The inside pocket still contained the six magical dice, their only chance at becoming normal again.

As tired as they all were, it was the kids who fell asleep first. Uncertainty and terror must have been really exhausting. Everyone else, it seemed, had gotten a second or third wind.

"Professor," said Tim once he had a healthy dose of scotch in his system. "You got any more of that merrythistle?"

"Whoa!" said Dave. "Look who finally decided to let his hair down."

"What's that supposed to mean? I'm always up for a good smoke."

Dave stood up and put his hands on his hips. "Hey you guys. What the shit is going on here?" His voice was artificially high-pitched, a mockery of Tim's. It got laughs from Dennis and Randy, and even Cooper.

"Oh, I'm so sorry that I didn't think we should all be high as fuck before we had to face off against…" He looked at the children passed out peacefully on the bed and laughed. "… Against these fucking kids."

Julian and Cooper had a good laugh at that. Dave choked on his scotch.

Thankfully, Professor Goosewaddle had more merrythistle handy. They cracked the windows and lit up the pipe.

On the road from Mobile to Montgomery, Tim, Dave, Julian, Cooper, and Chaz filled in Randy, Dennis, and Professor Goosewaddle on the finer details of what had brought them to this point. They spoke of Mordred, Captain Righteous, the Whore's Head Inn, Millard the Vampire, the Horsemen, and general life in Cardinia. Randy and Dennis were just high and drunk enough to buy into every ridiculous word of it.

Katherine turned onto I-85 once they reached Montgomery, but pulled onto the shoulder shortly after that.

"The sky is lightening up," she said. "It's time for one of you to take over."

Katherine pulled the Bag of Holding over her head, and Chaz took over the final leg of the journey to Atlanta.

About an hour later, the sun peeked over the eastern horizon. Dave struggled to stay awake long enough to pray for his daily allotment of Healing spells, and shortly after fell asleep with his head resting on a healthy and grateful Butterbean.

Tim grabbed an emergency flashlight from a wall socket. "I'm going into the bag," he said to Julian, the only one, aside from Chaz, who was still awake at that point. "Give me about ten seconds, then pull me back out." He stepped into the Bag of Holding. The sensation this time was stranger than usual, as it felt like he should be falling through the floor of the RV onto pavement rushing by at eighty miles per hour.

But there was no pavement. No traffic. No white noise. Just peaceful darkness. Void.

Tim clicked on the flashlight. Light reflected off of random, floating debris. An Arby's wrapper here. A torn scrap of clothing there. Finally, he found what he was looking for. Katherine and Ginfizzle, sound asleep, floating in space. They were locked together in an embrace, with Ginfizzle's head nuzzled against Katherine's breasts. They looked

so peaceful, like a mother and child. It didn't make what Tim had to do any easier.

Sound and light came crashing back as Tim was yanked backwards into natural space-time.

"Everything okay?" asked Julian.

Tim shrugged. He walked up to the front of the RV. "Pull over."

"There's an exit five miles up the road," said Chaz. "Can you hold it?"

"There's a bathroom twenty feet behind me," said Tim. "Pull over here."

Chaz pulled the RV onto the shoulder of an innocuous stretch of open road. Tim looked out the window. To the right was an open meadow. No trees. No rocks. No shade. Tall grass and blue wildflowers. It was perfect.

"Keep the engine running," Tim instructed Chaz. "I'll be right back." He grabbed the Bag of Holding, opened the door, and stepped outside.

He walked a good fifty yards out into the meadow, far enough for people casually passing by at eighty miles per hour not to be able to see what he was doing. When he judged himself far enough away from the road, he still waited for as big a gap in traffic as he could get.

The little shit inside this bag had been a remorseless killer in life, and he was no better in undeath. Tim held the Bag of Holding upside-down and reached up into the opening. "Ginfizzle."

The miniature vampire spilled out of the bag and immediately began to sizzle in the quiet light of dawn. His eyelids opened wide, allowing his liquefied eyeballs to run down either side of his bubbling, blistering face. He hissed and gasped as he made one desperate swipe in Tim's general direction, but he didn't even come close to touching him. The skin of his arm ignited, and his arm fell across his chest, catching the rest of him on fire. It was a quick-burning fire, consuming his clothes and skin in less than a minute, leaving behind only a clean white skeleton. It looked like a child's skeleton, only with big, pointy incisors. A few seconds later, even those remains collapsed in on themselves and crumbled into a pile of fine, white dust.

Neither Julian nor Chaz asked any questions about what happened when Tim returned to the RV, though they had both no doubt been watching through the windows. Chaz was in the driver's seat, and Julian had gone as far as to pretend he was sleeping.

"Elves don't sleep," said Tim.

Julian opened his eyes. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Nope."

"Okay."

When they got close enough to Atlanta, Tim banged the butt of his

dagger on the wall. “Rise and shine!”

Cooper responded with a fart, and that did more to wake everyone else up than the noise did. With the windows open as wide as they would go, the sandy-haired skinny kid – Tim neither knew nor cared which one he was – navigated them toward the suburban neighborhood where the four of them lived.

“We’re just going to drop you kids off at the front of your neighborhood,” said Tim. “You can make it from there, right?” The four of them nodded.

Twenty minutes later, the RV pulled up to a quaint little subdivision with a large wooden sign at the front which read *Peachtree Springs*.

“I want you kids to forget whatever you think you saw or experienced,” said Tim. “And remember, life gets better after high school. You can let your nerd flag fly, and nobody will ever give you shit about it. Just promise me you’ll hang on until then, and try to be good people.” It wasn’t a Braveheart caliber speech, and the bit about life getting better might have been a bit of a stretch, but it was the best his liquor-addled brain could puke up just then.

The former Horsemen were crowded at the door, as if they still weren’t sure that they were actually going to be released. They nodded enthusiastically.

“All right,” said Tim. “Go on then.”

As soon as they were clear of the door, Tim shut it. “Step on it, Chaz. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

As the RV pulled away, Cooper stuck his head out the open window. “STAY IN SCHOOL! Drew Brees out!”

*

Two hours later, southbound on I-85, Chaz pulled the RV into a Denny’s. Neither staff nor patron gave them a second glance as they crowded into a corner booth. Cooper might have tipped that scale if Julian hadn’t suggested he keep his helmet on.

They ordered one of every major item on the menu, and several sides of bacon. Professor Goosewaddle was delighted with his *Moons Over My Hammy*, especially when Julian splashed a bit of Tabasco sauce on the eggs.

“We have a decision to make,” said Tim through a mouthful of scrambled eggs. “We’ve got the dice. We can go back to our normal lives now. But if we do, it’ll be just like with the Horsemen. Exactly as we were before we left. No memory of Cardinia, game skills, magical powers, all the guys who are still stuck at the Whore’s Head Inn. We’ll forget any of this ever happened.”

Julian looked down into his orange juice. “I’ll never see Ravenus again.”

"What's the other choice?" asked Dave.

"We teleport back with Professor Goosewaddle, of course," said Tim.

"Who would be stupid enough to choose that?"

"I have to," said Tim. "I've got to go back for Stacy."

Cooper spread a chunk of butter on a roll with his finger and shoved the whole thing in his mouth. "I'll follow Tim."

"I'm not ready to say goodbye yet," said Julian. "I'm going back."

The table was silent. Not so much as the clink of a fork on a dish. Everyone looked at Dave.

"I'm sorry, guys," said Dave. "You guys do what you want,, but this is my stop." He wiped his beard with a napkin. "Tim, pass me a die, would you?"

"Sure, Dave," said Tim. He pulled one of the black dice out of the bag and carefully placed it in Dave's hand. "We'll miss you."

"I'm sorry," said Dave.

"You don't have to be," said Tim. "I completely understand."

"You guys take care of yourselves." Dave closed his eyes and clenched his fist around the black die. "Dave, return!"

Dave neither vanished nor changed in appearance.

"I'm still here."

Tim frowned. "Yeah, you are."

Dave shut his eyes harder and clenched his fist tighter. "DAVE, RETURN!"

"I think Dave needs to shut the fuck up," said a man in the next booth over. The other men at his table laughed.

"Keep it down, Dave," said Tim. "It's not working."

"But why not?" asked Dave. "I did exactly the same thing Mordred did. There weren't any strange incantations or Latin bullshit. All he said was their names and *return.*"

"Try rolling it," suggested Julian.

Dave shrugged and rolled the die on the table. It stopped in front of Randy.

"What sort of game is this?" asked Professor Goosewaddle.

"It says *12,*" said Randy. "Did you win?"

"Maybe that one's all magicked out," said Dave. "Let me try another one."

"Magical dice?" asked the professor. "How peculiar. Let me have a look."

"Sure," said Randy. He rolled the die over to the professor, and promptly disappeared.

"What the?" said Dennis. "Where the *fuck* did Randy go?"

Tim had just finished retrieving a new die from the dice bag. He put it back in. "I guess it's not magicked out after all."

“Can I have his sausages?” asked Cooper, not waiting for a response before reaching over to grab Randy’s plate.

“What happened to Randy?” Dennis repeated.

“He crossed over,” said Tim. “He’s in the game world, just like what happened to us.”

“So he *changed*?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“So what is he?” asked Dennis. “Is he a midget, like you? Or a different sort of midget, like this guy?” He nodded at Professor Goosewaddle. “Or a fat midget like Dave?” He looked at Cooper. “Or whatever the hell he is?”

“Who knows?” said Tim. “The game decides. He might even turn out human, like Chaz did.”

Dennis turned to Chaz. “So this is what you meant. This is how I can become a whole man again.”

“Uh…” said Chaz. “Yeah.”

“Give me the die, Professor.”

“This is powerful magic,” said Professor Goosewaddle. He held one eye closed. His open eye glowed white as he stared at the black die in his hand. “In all my years, I’ve not seen anything quite like this.”

“Why didn’t it work for me?” asked Dave.

“Well that much is easy enough to answer, at least,” said Professor Goosewaddle. “This die is tethered to its owner. It is not yours to command.”

“Well give it here, Goosewiggle,” said Dennis. He swiped the die out of Professor Goosewaddle’s fingers.

“Are you sure you want this?” asked Tim. “It’s a dangerous world over there.”

Dennis’s eyes began to tear up as he let the die fall out of his hand onto the table. “There’s only one thing I want, and that’s balls!”

The man in the next booth peeked his head over the partition. “What in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?”

Dennis had disappeared. Dave and Cooper pointed at one another.

“Gentlemen,” said their waitress, who had just turned up to refill Chaz’s coffee. “I’m gonna have to ask you to keep your voices down.”

When she was gone, Tim huddled everyone together. “Sorry, Dave. It looks like I was wrong about our options. I don’t see how we have any choice but to go back.”

“For what?” asked Dave.

“For Mordred,” said Julian. “If we can track him down there, we can force him to return us to normal.” After a short pause, he added. “For those of us who want that.”

Dave sighed. “So when do we leave.”

“I think we’d better go right now,” said Tim.

“What’s the big hurry?”

“We have a more immediate problem.”

“Oh, great,” said Dave. “And what would that be?”

Tim looked at all the dishes and scraps of food on the table. “Dennis was the only one here who had any money.”

“Oh shit,” said Cooper. “That’s pretty fucking inconsiderate, transporting into a different world and sticking us with the bill.”

“Professor,” said Tim. “It’s time to go. Do you have that Mass Teleport spell ready?”

“Of course,” said the professor. “I’ll need everyone to join hands.”

“Wait!” said Julian. He stood up and ran outside. Half a minute later, he was back inside Denny’s, along with the Bag of Holding, Ravenus, and Butterbean.

“Goddamn!” shouted the man in the next booth.

The waitress jumped over the counter. “Sir! You can’t bring a wolf into Denny’s!”

“We’d better make this quick,” said Julian. “Ravenus, stay perched on my shoulder.” He grabbed Cooper’s arm with his left hand and Butterbean’s paw with his right. “Let’s go, Professor.”

Professor Goosewaddle grabbed the bottle of Tabasco sauce and set it on his lap. “Everyone join hands.” The incantation must have been in Gnomish because Tim couldn’t make out anything he was saying.

Denny’s started to spin around. The waitress’s screams and Butterbean’s howls swirled together as the fabric of time and space wrung itself like a beach towel. When reality began to take form once again, it was clear they were no longer inside Denny’s.

Chapter 36

"Have you even considered using these powers for good? I mean just think of how rich and famous you could be without actually killing everyone. You could irrigate deserts, heal the sick, take up professional wrestling. Really, you're only limited by your imaginations on this one."

As long as they were letting her talk, Stacy wished they'd take the bag off her head. Still, she considered it a good sign that they hadn't smacked her in the head for getting the gag out of her mouth, and an even better sign that they were listening to her pitch. Their continued silence was a little unnerving, but it must have meant that they were at least giving it some thought, right? At this point, it was a war of attrition. As long as they neither beat her, nor argued with her, their defenses would slowly erode, and they'd come around to her way of thinking. It was a tactic she was well versed in.

"And think of the women! Those faith-healers you see on TV, I guarantee you they're getting it morning, noon, and night, and their entire practice is based on bullshit. You've got *real* healing powers. You could start your own alternative medicine practice. I could even help you get started. I've got experience working in a clinic. I mean, really, I pretty much run the whole place for Dr. Baxter. That's my boss back home. He's a great guy and all, but seriously, imagining him trying to run that place without me, it's not even worth thinking about. Of course what you've got in mind is different from a poison control clinic, but that's kind of my point. What *you're* proposing," *It's important to make them believe it was their idea.* "is so radically different than anything we've already got back on Earth, we'd be building from the ground up."

They'd been flying for a long time, much longer than it should have taken to get back to their villa. *Was that a good sign or a bad sign? Keep talking.*

"Heck, if you play your cards right, you might even be hailed as Messiahs. That is, if you wanted to take it in that direction. That kind of fame comes with its own price tag, and you should take some time to consider if you want to take it that far. Me? I'd go with a lot of money and just a bit of fame. Maybe get interviewed by Oprah. That's just me though. Maybe Conan's your thing. The point is that you have so many options right now. Once you start murdering people, your options are significantly reduced. On the other hand, say you don't really take to the faith-healing, talk-show circuit. You'll still have the hostile takeover option available. *Why limit yourself?* is what I'm saying." The bag was getting stuffy, and it was getting harder to

breathe and talk. It was time to lay down her cards. “You guys have been quiet for a while. Is any of this getting through? I mean, is there anything you’d like to contribute or ask?”

“Just one question,” said a voice that didn’t sound like any of the Horsemen. In fact, it almost sounded like… “How might you suggest we apply our powers to, let’s say… the restaurant business?”

“Tim?”

“I honestly thought you were never going to shut up.”

Stacy felt Tim’s little hand take hold of hers. She tensed at first, but then relaxed as he cut her hands free. She took the bag off her head. The Horsemen were gone, and the carpet wasn’t moving at all. It was just hovering, barely beyond the walls of the big city. And there was Tim, sitting next to her, grinning.

“How did you get up here?”

“Professor Goosewaddle gave me a boost,” said Tim, pointing down.

Stacy peeked over the edge of the carpet. A hundred feet below, Dave, Cooper, Chaz, Julian, and Professor Goosewaddle waved up at her. She waved back. “Hey guys!”

She wrung the lingering rope pain out of her wrists. “What happened to the Horsemen?”

“They’re back home,” said Tim.

“Oh shit,” said Stacy. “Are they killing everyone?”

Tim shook his head. “You’ve got nothing to fear from the Horsemen ever again.”

“And Mordred?”

Tim frowned. “The jury’s still out on that one. He’s here somewhere.”

*

At the Whore’s Head Inn, the flying carpet was initially met with hostility. Bows were drawn. The magic people’s hands all glowed bright with spells ready to knock Stacy and her friends out of the sky.

Cooper grabbed Tim and stood at the front of the carpet as it descended. He raised Tim over his head like baby Simba.

“Hold your fire!” shouted Frank. “Is that… Could it really be?”

“Drew Brees?” said the elf next to him.

“Put me down, shithead!” Tim shouted at Cooper.

“Lower your weapons!” shouted Frank. “It’s Tim! They’ve come back!” Archers lowered their bows. Glowing hands stopped glowing. Everyone stopped what they were doing to crowd around the descending carpet.

“Stage dive!” Cooper shouted, tossing Tim into the crowd.

“Shiiiiiiiiiiit!” said Tim as he sailed through the air. The crowd parted, and Tim hit the dirt.

Stacy winced. “Ow.”

“Sorry, dude,” said Cooper. “That played out differently than what I had envisioned.”

“Cooper!” said Frank, moving in to give him a hug, but stopping just short of actually touching him. “It’s great to see you again. Love the uniform. Say, did your ass get bigger?”

“Nah,” said Cooper. “I just really need to change my pants.”

“I like what you’ve done with the place,” said Julian. “I notice you got the bar rebuilt before you even finished the roof.”

Frank shrugged. “A man’s got to have priorities, right?”

Julian made eye contact with a young couple sitting at the bar. The man was a half-elf, shirtless and broad-chested except for the strap of the quiver he wore on his back. The woman, only recognizable as such due to her very ample bosom, was a dwarf, like Dave but with less facial hair. The man gave Julian an idle salute.

“Hey there, uh… Buddy,” said Julian. It was painfully obvious that he recognized Julian, but Julian had no idea who he was.

“Awkward!” Stacy whispered, knowing only Julian would be able to hear her.

Julian blushed. Two seconds later, recognition clicked in Stacy’s mind, and she soon felt the rush of blood in her own cheeks too. She looked back at the man at the bar. He was slimmer, stronger, and tanner, but there was no mistaking him.

“*Randy*?”

“Hey, Stacy! I didn’t think y’all’d reckonize us.”

Stacy ran around to the other side of the bar and jumped into his surprisingly muscular arms. “Look at you!”

“I know, right!” said Randy, setting her down. He flexed. “I ain’t never had abs that I could see before!”

Stacy elbowed him in the side, winked, and mock whispered, “Who’s the babe?”

The woman seated next to Randy started weeping. Her face smashed hard against the bar. Randy frowned sympathetically.

“Oh no!” said Stacy.

“What’s wrong?” asked Cooper.

“Oh shit,” said Tim. “Dude, I’m sorry. I didn’t –”

“Shh!” said Randy, casting a quick glance at the others in the Whore’s Head. He spoke very slowly and deliberately. “Friends, I’d like to introduce you to a new friend of mine, Denise. Denise, these are my friends. Tim, Cooper, Dave, Julian, Professor Goosewaddle, and… I’m sorry, what was your name again?”

“Chaz,” said Chaz.

“And Chaz,” said Randy. “Would you like to say hello?”

Denise lifted one hand and stopped crying long enough to say,

“S’up?”

“Frank,” said Tim. “Could you guys excuse us for a few minutes?”

“Is there a problem?” asked Frank.

“It’s kind of a personal thing.”

“Yeah,” said Frank. “No problem. Use the cellar if you like.”

“Thanks.”

Frank clapped his hands twice and raised his voice. “Come on, everyone, let’s get back to work!”

Tim held the cellar door open as everyone filed down the stairs single file, except for Randy, who escorted a still-weeping Denise.

“You said I’d grow my balls back!” Denise shouted at Chaz.

“I didn’t say any such thing!” said Chaz. “I said there was a *chance*.”

“Hey, wait,” said Cooper. “That’s the *cop*?”

“Way to keep up, big guy,” said Tim.

“That’s fucking hilarious.”

Denise rushed at Cooper.

It took Randy, Chaz, and Dave to hold her back.

“Let go of me!” cried Denise, throwing Chaz off of her left arm. Randy, thanks to his strength, and Dave, thanks to his girth, were more difficult to shake. “All right already, I’m cool.”

Randy and Dave let go of her.

“It’s not his fault,” said Dave. “And it’s not Chaz’s fault either. Look.” He held up his left arm. The forearm was completely covered in leopard fur. “The game gets confused sometimes. That’s how I got this.”

“You think that compares?” said Denise. “You got a furry arm. I got big titties and a *fuckin’ vag*!” He hefted his ‘big titties’ up and down to accentuate his point.

Cooper snorted. “At least you got to keep your goatee.”

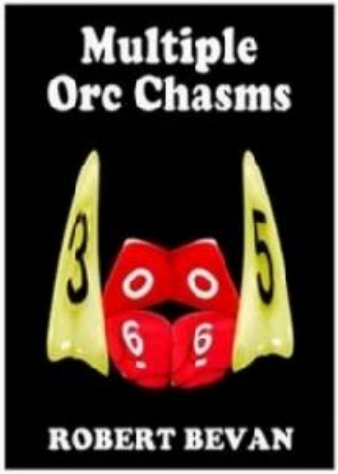
Denise rushed at him again, but Randy and Dave were ready to block her. “I’ll kill you!”

“Enough!” said Tim. It was more authoritative than Stacy imagined his little voice could achieve. “We understand you’re upset. We’re all upset. None of us are who and what we’re supposed to be. Your anger is misdirected.”

“Well then give me a fuckin’ direction, ‘cause this shit’s comin’ out!”

“Tonight, we drink. Tomorrow, we set out to find our common enemy, Mordred.”

The End.





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If you enjoyed this story, please leave a review. It would mean so much to me.